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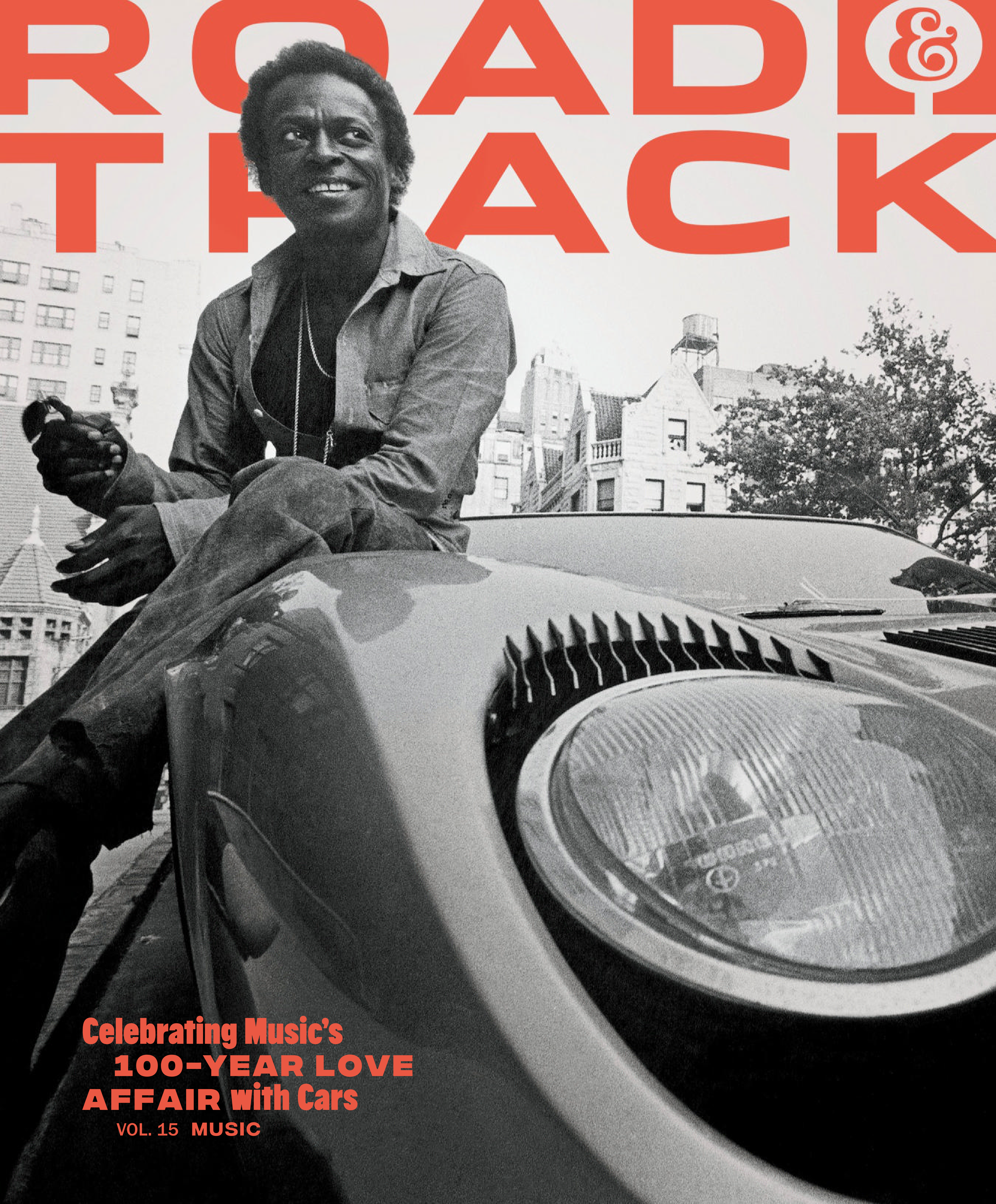

Celebrating Music's 100-YEAR LOVE AFFAIR with Cars

VOL. 15 **MUSIC**

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Range Rover Sport with optional equipment. Pre-production model shown. Color not available. © 2023 Jaguar Land Rover North America, LLC

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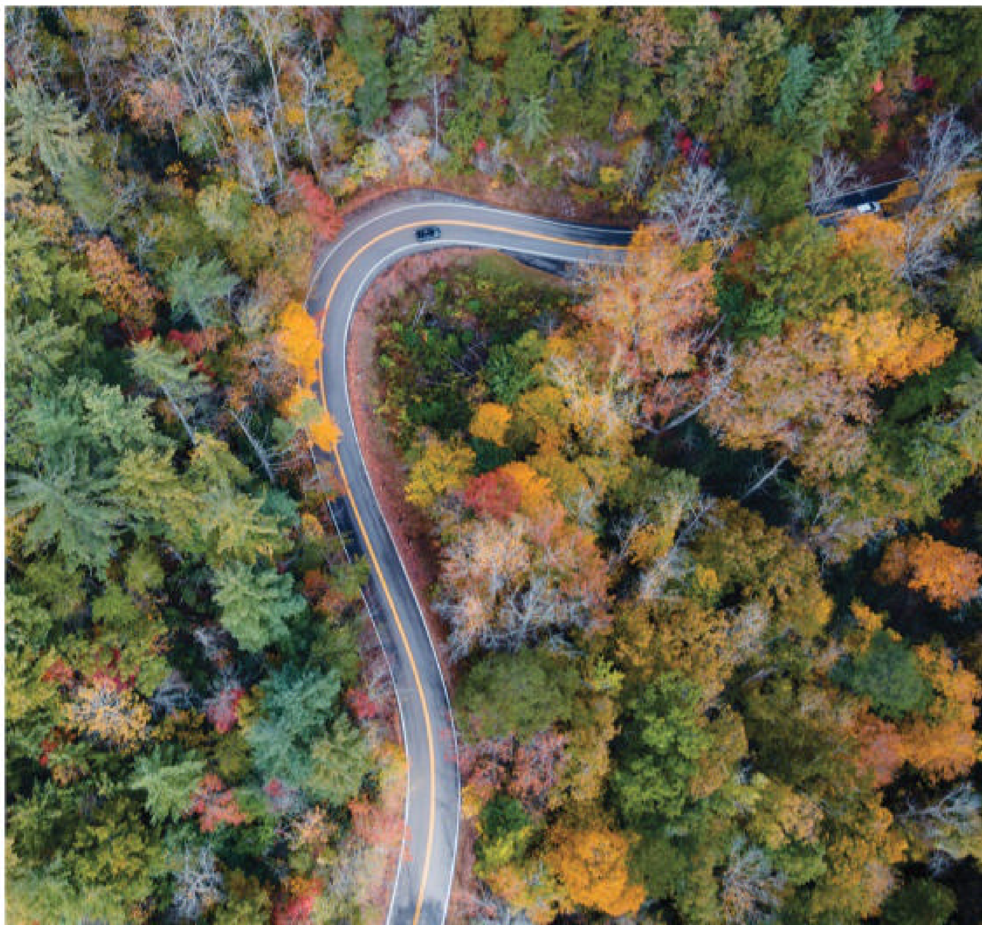

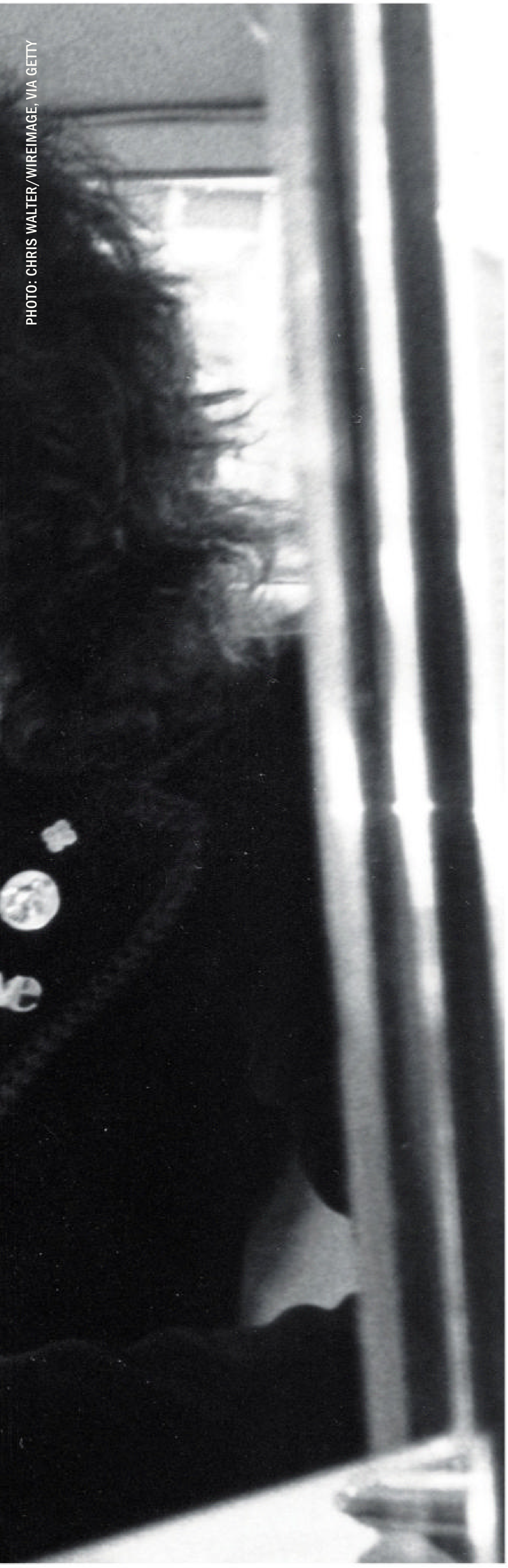
PHOTO: CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE, VIA GETTY

GOT A FEEL FOR MY AUTOMOBILE

FOR THE FIRST-EVER *R&T* MUSIC ISSUE, WE STRAINED TO AVOID THE COMMONPLACE.

WHEN QUEEN SANG "I'm in Love with My Car" on their sublime 1975 album, *A Night at the Opera*, the line "got a feel for my automobile" worked because it rhymed, not because Freddie Mercury, Brian May, and drummer Roger Taylor (who sang this song) were gearheads. But history brims with rock stars who really did love cars, who sang about them, collected them, even died driving them. Popular music, especially after World War II, has been mortally linked with cars.

For the average teenager, the car radio became as important as the car itself. I had suitcases of mixtapes and dubbed cassettes, then books of CDs that dates and buddies flipped through as I carved the side roads in southern Maine. I knew which station was getting the Led out at any given hour. But my undying love for Pink Floyd and Bruce Springsteen had to take a back seat for this, the first-ever *Road & Track* Music issue, where we're taking a fresh look at the inseparable histories of two very American phenomena.

To avoid the old car clichés, we made a banned-band list to prevent ourselves from steering down an editorial highway jammed with broken heroes on a last-chance power drive. Go ahead and make your own list. Here's mine:

Eric Clapton. Say what you will about Clapton's music; he had a Ferrari named after him. Enough said.

Nick Mason. Again, I love Pink Floyd, and like most gentleman guitarists, I worship the playing of David Gilmour. Floyd's drummer, Mason, was no John Bonham, but he has a fantastic car collection. So good, in fact, that car mags have been covering it forever. You're a nice guy, Nick, but you're overexposed.

James Hetfield. Yeah, I don't care about his cars.

Springsteen. What exactly is a last-chance power drive?

ZZ Top. While they were once heroic mumblers with nasty guitar work, the cheese of *Eliminator* nearly led to a cars/music divorce.

The list is much longer than we have space for. There's at least 70 years of car clichés in pop. So instead, read on and discover the fresh stuff we went for: the sonic landscapes that Elliot Scheiner created for Acura (page 050), the little-known road trip that led to the *Sgt. Pepper's* album (page 018), the car collection of Killer Mike (page 082), and Hunter S. Thompson's death-defying quest to hang with Cream drummer Ginger Baker (page 090). Then there's our profile of Miles Davis (page 038), who was very effortlessly the car guy Clapton only wishes he could be.

Mike

MIKE GUY
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

12

012 10-Part Harmony
Built like a fine instrument, the V-10-powered Lexus LFA produces exquisite music.

018 He's Leaving Home
In '66, Paul McCartney took a road trip to find peace. He returned with a masterpiece.

022 About a Van
The Melvan toured during peak grunge, adorned with a livery by Kurt Cobain.

028 The Gong Show
Can you tell time with just your ears? With a minute repeater, you can.

030 The Joe Walsh Effect
How one famously untrue line helped Maserati survive its leanest years.

034 Motocross Mama
Loretta Lynn's act of grace sustained amateur motocross in America.

038 Running the Voodoo Down
It never got cooler than this: Miles Davis was a secret enthusiast superhero.

050 The Man with the Golden Ear
Veteran music producer Elliot Scheiner's quest to bring hi-fi to your headrests.

056 Road Noise
Musician John Flansburgh tests the most elaborate factory audio systems.

062 Here Comes Your Van
Pixies frontman Black Francis learned to love the road in a 1986 Cadillac.

070 Icons & Their Cars
Five vignettes highlight the timeless connection between artists and the road.

082 The Gilded Outlaw
Hip-hop legend Killer Mike builds community with four wheels and a dream.

090 Just How Weird Can You Stand It?
Cream drummer Ginger Baker merely marked the end of one gonzo adventure.

COVER: MILES DAVIS PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PATIKY/CONDÉ NAST/SHUTTERSTOCK

VOL. 15: MUSIC

3

100 **2023 Performance Car of the Year**
Ten enter. One leaves victorious. Welcome to our high-performance Thunderdome.

102 **From the Editor**
What is PCOTY? Answers here. Plus, an introduction to the competitors.

104 **The Track**
We return to Monticello, where the almighty stopwatch separates wheat from chaff.

112 **The Road**
New York unfurls its smooth byways and fall splendor for our rowdy contenders.

120 **The Champ**
There can be only one! *Road & Track*'s 2023 Performance Car of the Year.

128 **Prince of Leaves**
The Purple One wasn't exactly a car nerd, yet we can't shake this image from our minds.

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Joe Levy

LEVY, AN editor-at-large at *Billboard*, hosts the podcast *Setting the Standard: Stories from the Great American Songbook*. For this issue, he writes about the life of Miles Davis and how the trumpeter's philosophy of perpetual forward motion found expression in his music and his passion for Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and all types of speed in "Running the Voodoo Down" (page 038).

John Flansburgh

Flansburgh is co-founder of the platinum-selling band They Might Be Giants. Like many musicians, he loves listening to music in cars. In "Road Noise" (page 056), he tests various automotive audio systems. He has earned two Grammys, and They Might Be Giants is nominated again this year for the package design of their album (and book) titled *Book*. He is on the road across the U.S. through the summer (or maybe fall).

Mark Healy

A middle-aged wannabe car enthusiast, Healy is a former editor at *GQ* and *Rolling Stone*. He was editor-in-chief at *Men's Journal*, where he managed many actual gearheads and polished their writing. Healy explores for us the connection between Joe Walsh and the continued survival of Maserati in "The Joe Walsh Effect" (page 030). He is currently the VP of content at Ceros, a software company, and he does his daydreaming on Bring a Trailer.

Julie Murphy

Chicago's Murphy creates illustrations and experiments with animation. Her art is often exhibited in galleries. The circuitous route she's taken through a variety of day jobs has inspired her art. A lifelong Beatles listener, Murphy admires how the band's creative evolution mined personal narratives while both mirroring and shaping the atmosphere of the time. Her illustrations of Paul McCartney in "He's Leaving Home" (page 018) reflect this artistic journey.

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HONDA

We never let victory stop us. The Suzuka Circuit is a legend sketched in pavement, an international figure-eight racetrack in Japan's Mie Prefecture. In 2021, the fifth-generation Honda Civic Type R made history on the course, breaking the speed record for a front-wheel-drive car. The record was a thrill to achieve, but it wouldn't last long. Because when Honda engineers began work on the sixth-generation Type R, they set out to break it all over again.

Racing is an exercise in boundary-pushing. Crossing one threshold, only to seek out the next. For Honda, this tradition dates back to our first Formula 1® victory. In 1965, we won the FORMULA 1 MEXICAN GRAND PRIX, proving that a team of motorbike engineers could also build a world-class race car. But we didn't stop there. For the next six decades, we kept racing, rebuilding, and racing again. And in 2022, Max Verstappen won the FIA Formula One World Championship™ with technical support from Honda.

That same desire lies at the heart of Civic Type R—to always exceed one's last success. Honda engineers knew the 2023 model would need to outperform its predecessor. They started in the engine, optimizing it for 315 hp and 310 lb-ft of torque. They streamlined the exterior for downforce and stability. They also incorporated a data-logging system, LogR,® that displays the vehicle's real-time racing data both in front of the steering wheel and in the center-mounted touch-screen display. When they were done, the engineers had created the most powerful Honda production car ever—all in pursuit of victory on the Suzuka Circuit.

Last March, the all-new 2023 Civic Type R set a brand-new speed record. In final performance testing, it lapped the 3.6-mile configuration of the track nearly a second faster than the fifth-generation model. It was another landmark in automotive excellence. And it was a testament to the philosophy of always seeking new challenges.

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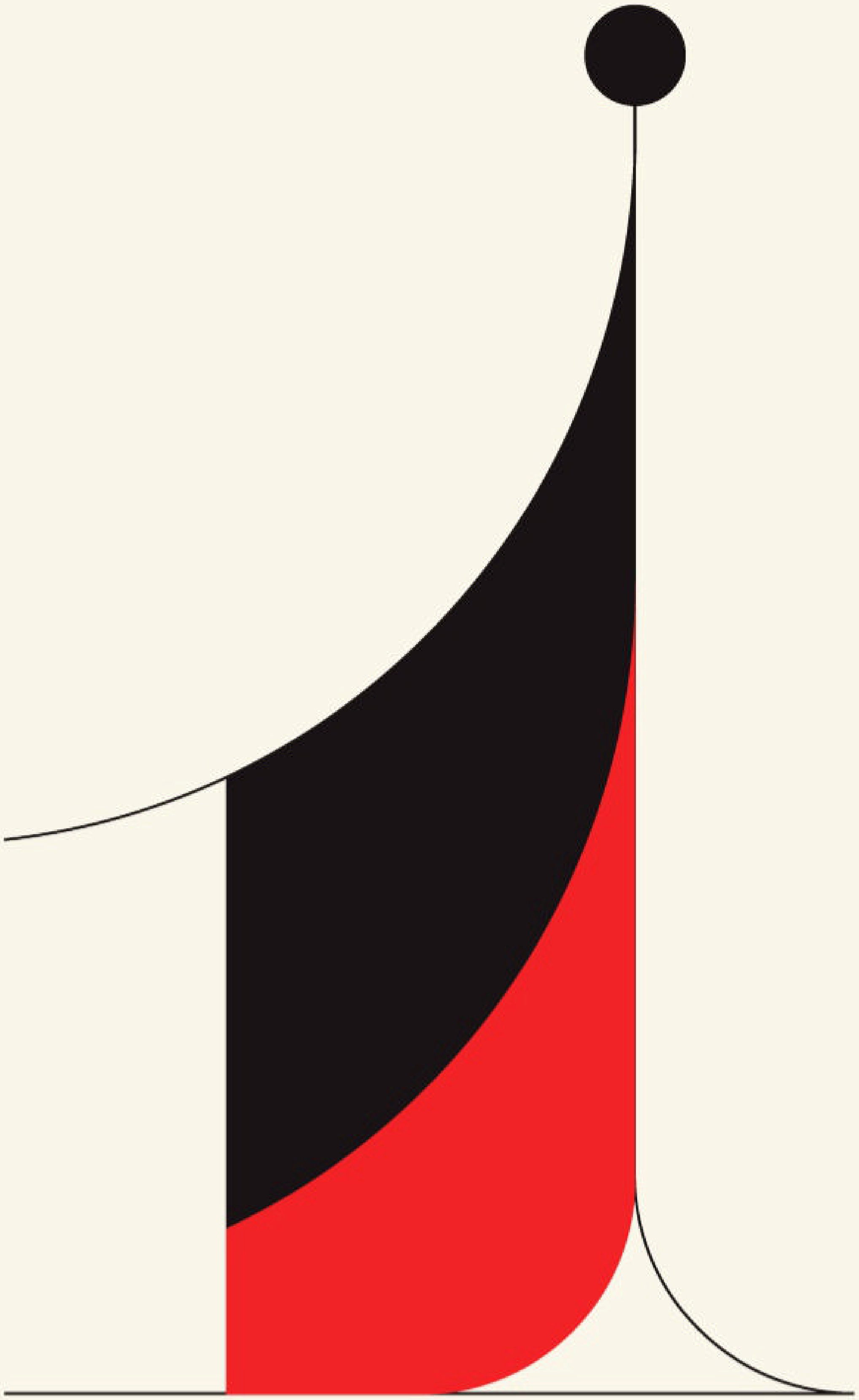


SECTION 1 PLAYLIST:

"Every Night" Paul McCartney / "Honey Bucket" Melvins / "Aneurysm" Nirvana
"Life's Been Good" Joe Walsh / "Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man" Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADAM G, TRÜF**

BY **BRENDAN McALEER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MARC URBANO**

10-PART

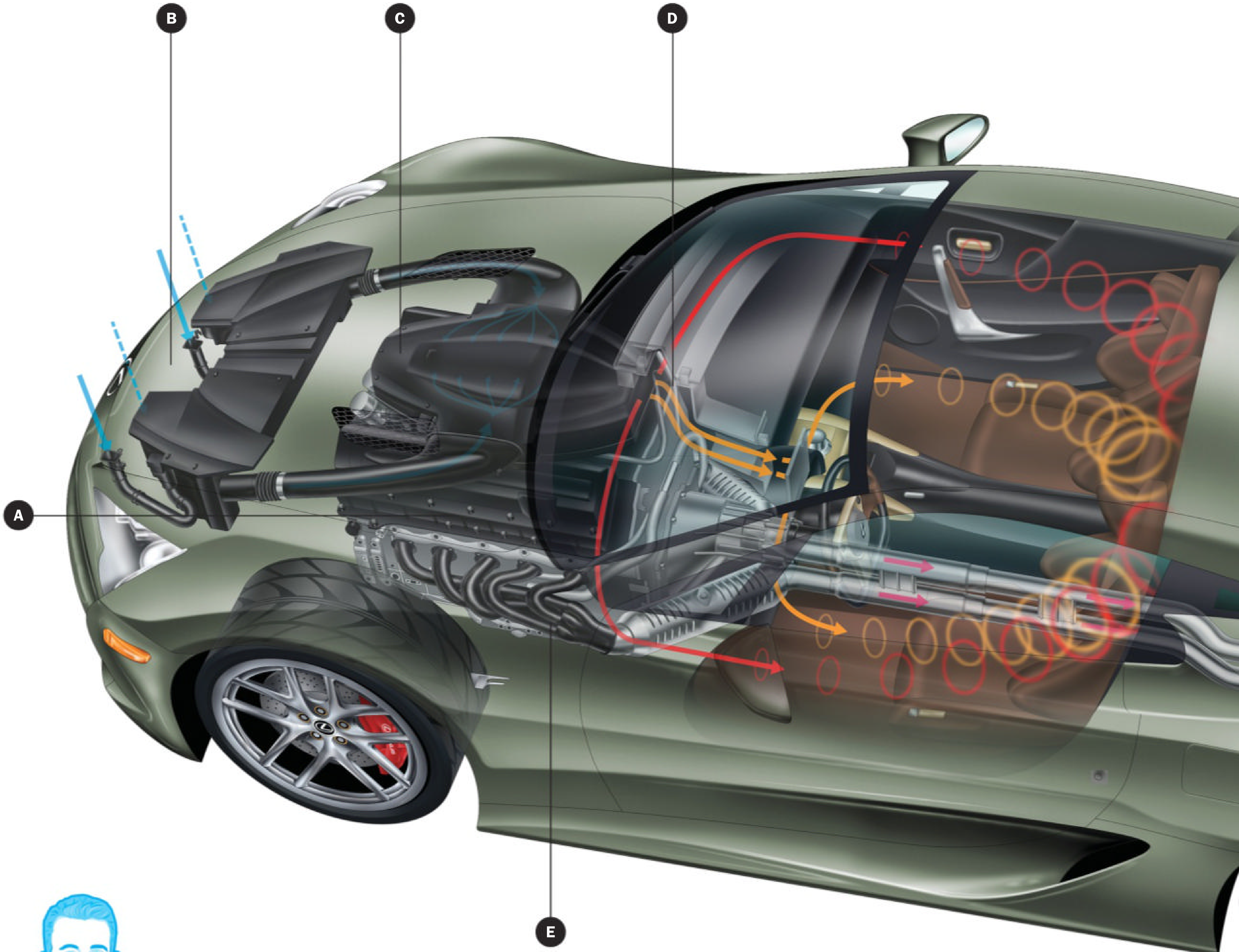
HARMONY

THE LEXUS LFA MAKES THE MOST EXQUISITE MUSIC.

HACKLES ARE THE FINE HAIRS at the back of your neck, evolutionary leftovers that can still rise like those of a protohuman ancestor hearing a wolf howl in darkness. Fight or flight, adrenaline pumping, senses heightened—a click of the column-mounted paddle shifter and a foot stabbing at the throttle. Hackles raised, choose combat.

A prehistoric hominid raises a burning branch; eons later, a spark ignites fuel 75 times every second. The idea is the same: fire as a weapon. Screaming to its 9000-rpm redline in six-tenths of a second, the Lexus LFA's 4.8-liter V-10 is a blur of magnesium and titanium, its complex engineering beyond common understanding. But the sound it makes—that sound is everything. The wolf pack howls, but it howls at the driver's instruction.

So let them run. The digital needle in the centrally mounted tachometer is required for this car's design, as the engine builds revs too fast



→ **RACER'S MUSIC**

AJ Allmendinger, 41, NASCAR

"The inside of my head is loud. I come home and immediately turn the TV on, or I wake up and put music on. It helps me quiet everything. I use music a lot at the racetrack, inside the hauler, or before I go out to drive. Five Finger Death Punch is a favorite. And Fire from the Gods."

—MARSHALL PRUETT

A. Titanium-alloy connecting rods, a lightweight crankshaft, and forged pistons lie at the center of the V-10's rotating mass. That allows the engine to race from idle to 9000 rpm in six-tenths of a second. At top speed, the pistons move at 25 meters per second.

Titanium is also used throughout the V-10's valvetrain, which features variable timing on both the exhaust and intake sides. Peak torque of 354 lb-ft arrives at 6800 rpm, with 90 percent available from 3700 rpm and still available when peak horsepower of 553 arrives at 8700 rpm.

Ten individual throttle bodies allow for exceptionally precise metering of air and fuel into each cylinder. In terms of specific power, the 115-hp-per-liter output of the LFA's engine closes in on the Honda S2000's but with two and a half times more cylinders.

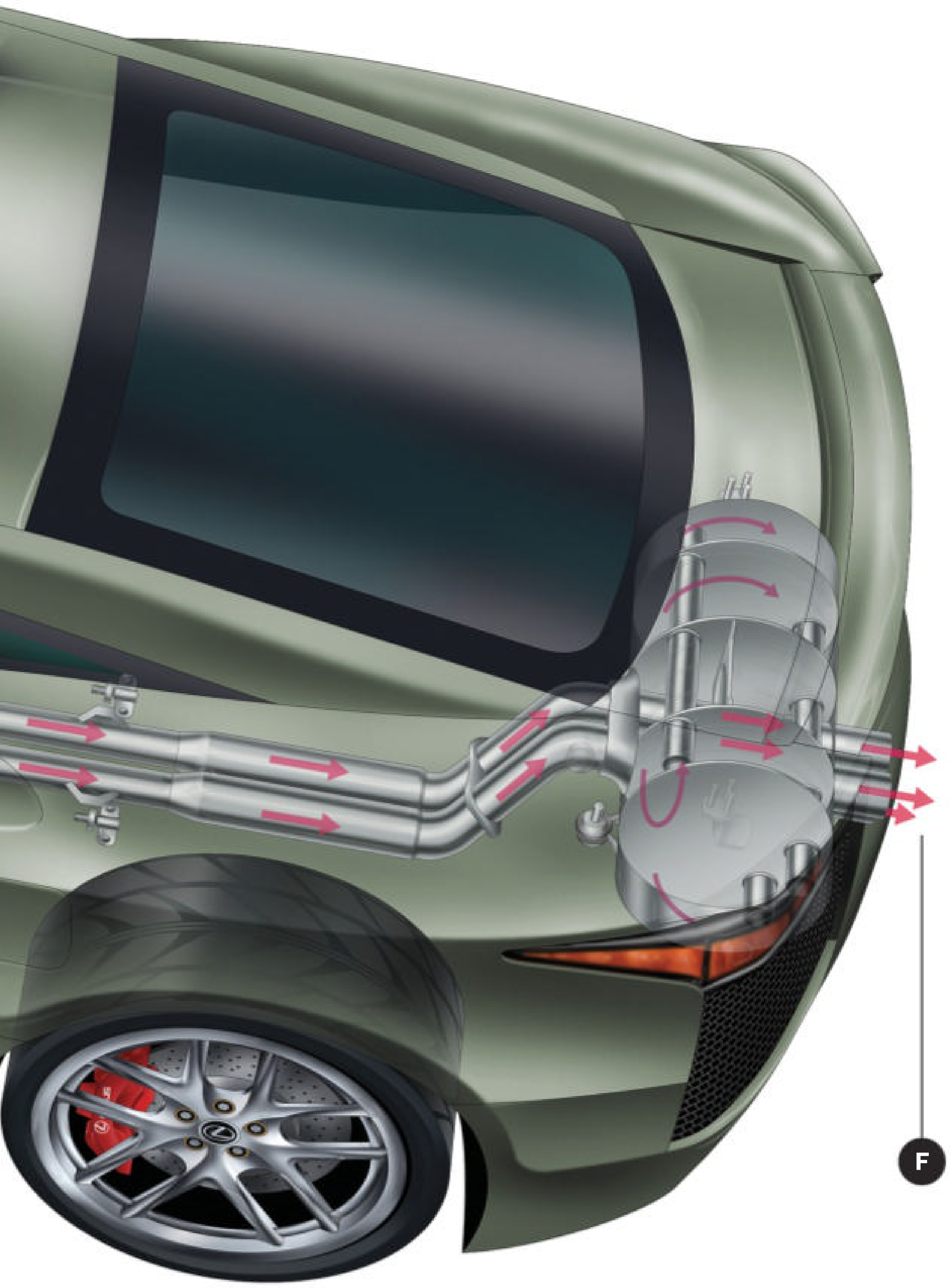
B. The twinned air intakes have dual-stage operation. For each, a constantly open primary breathing port feeds the engine air below 3000 rpm. When revs kick past 3000 rpm, the secondary ports open, allowing more air to reach the LFA's unique surge tank.

C. The surge tank sits atop the throttle bodies. Symmetrical in construction, it contains individual ribs like the braces inside a guitar or a violin. They allow for careful tuning of the induction resonance that is key to the LFA's acoustic performance. At engine speeds of about 3000 rpm, the harmonic produced is around 250 hertz. As revs climb to 6000 rpm and beyond, harmonics rise to 500 hertz, with a final peak of 600 hertz at redline.

D. To more effectively convey the experience to driver and passenger. Yamaha engi-

RACER'S MUSIC ILLUSTRATIONS BY BROWN BIRD DESIGN

ILLUSTRATION BY **MARK FRANKLIN**



neered a duct that directly funnels surge-tank resonance into the LFA's cabin. The sound arrives via multiple symmetrical paths, surrounding and bathing the cabin in a rising tide of induction noise.

E. Twinned five-into-one manifolds carry spent exhaust gases away from the two banks of the V-10 and into close-coupled catalytic converters. The exhaust is fully dual-piped all the way back to the rear muffler, the better to tune the exhaust pulses.

F. At the rear is the titanium exhaust box equipped with valving actuated by engine speed. Multiple resonance chambers allow for low-volume operation at low rpm while cruising. Above 3000 rpm, the actuator opens and allows the exhaust to bypass all but a single chamber, releasing the wail through the signature triple tailpipes.

for an analog sweep to keep up. As it approaches redline, the gauge flashes red in warning. Change gears, and the howl begins anew.

There are faster supercars. There are supercars that feel more analog. Many supercars need a lot less justification than this Lexus. No one needed to explain the appeal of the Ferrari F40 when it arrived; it was as raw as carpaccio and is still unmatched in mechanical fury.

The LFA debuted in 2009, priced near Carrera GT territory. But with peak power at 553 hp, it was 50 hp down on the V-10 Porsche. Dual-clutch offerings from Porsche, Ferrari, and even Nissan in the GT-R outclassed the LFA's single-clutch transaxle gearbox. And there was nothing particularly feathery about the Lexus's 3500-pound curb weight.

More than a dozen years after its launch, the LFA is now peerless as a precision-edged salute to the music of internal combustion. Lexus and Yamaha worked in concert to create a purely physical acoustic profile. In the twilight of the internal-combustion engine, the partnership between the two companies blended precision engineering with soulful quality, a symphony of flame and oxygen, a supercar that belts its heart out. The finely milled pieces of metal in the cabin feel like an exceptionally crafted woodwind. There's still an old-school feel—that magnificent engine requires a key and a steering-wheel-mounted starter button to fire it up.

The engine is the centerpiece, but the rest supports it. The LFA's tail steps out readily, while its quick steering makes every slide easy to catch. The car's carbon-fiber body brings authoritative solidity at hundreds of pounds less than a GT-R.

So, send that digital needle spinning clockwise and imagine stacks of spec sheets blurred into whirlwinds in the rearview mirror. Every LFA lost Toyota money. Ferrari and Lamborghini counterpunched with more power and better technology. But Lexus's engineers and test drivers chased more than mere numbers.

The LFA is not so much a car as an instrument created to stir something primordial within you. The V-10 howls, and your hackles stand at attention. It's a sound to make you bare your teeth. ®

→ **RACER'S MUSIC**

Bill Auberlen, 54, IMSA

"I'm massively into music and sound. My main boat has a $60,000 sound system. But I'm not the guy with headphones cranked at the racetrack to get myself motivated. That comes internally. When I climb into the Jacuzzi in the morning, it's very mellow house or spa music. Out on the boat, it could be techno or rock. AC/DC is a big one. I'm always looking for the pulse of the people."

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HE'S LEAVING HOME

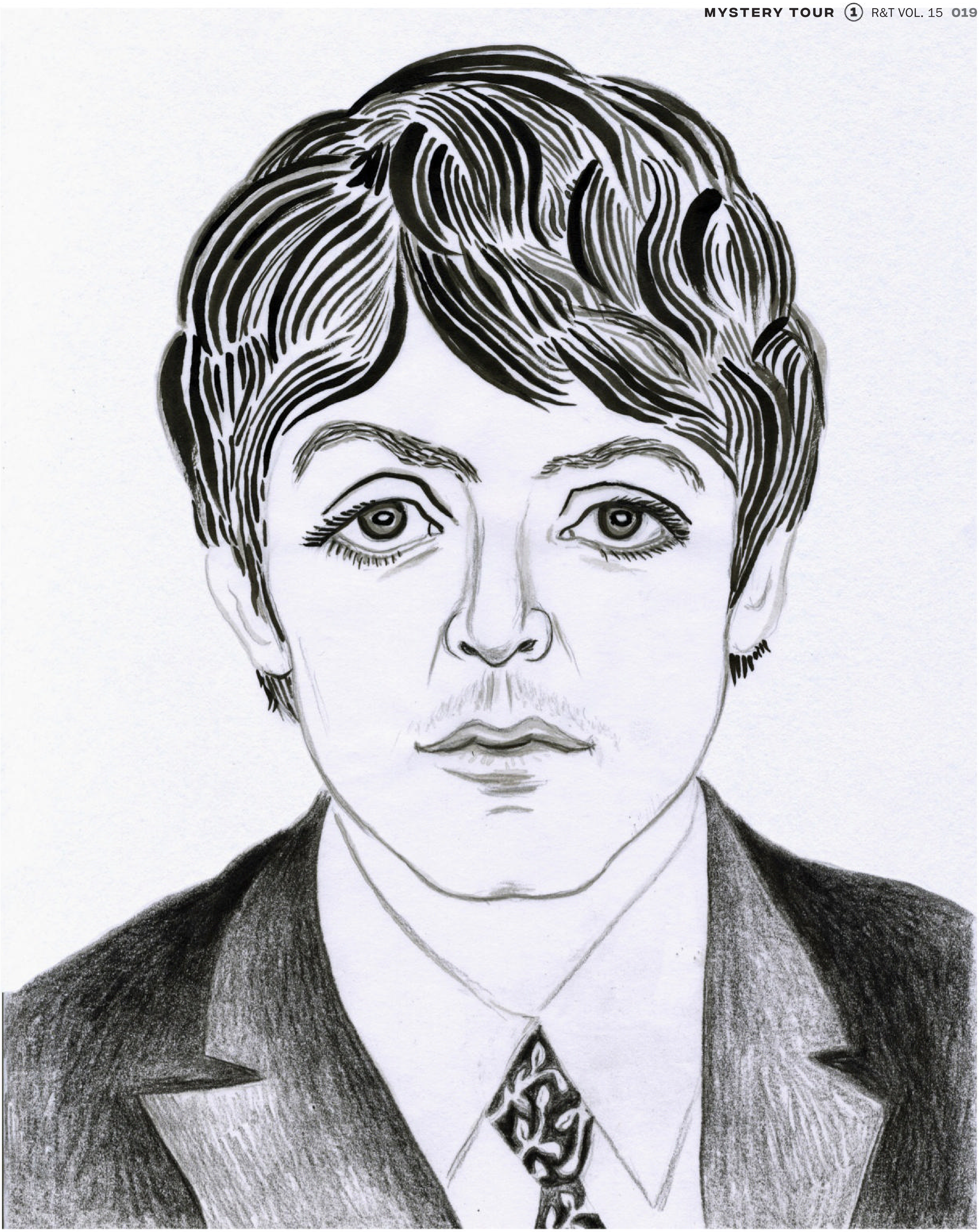
BY **MIKE GUY**

PAUL McCARTNEY'S SUPERSECRET 1966 INCOGNITO GETAWAY AND THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF A SIMPLE ROAD TRIP.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **JULIE MURPHY**

→ RACER'S MUSIC

Bobby Rahal, 69, IndyCar
"When I got started in racing, we didn't have personal music like today, with your phone and earbuds. Mostly for me, it was listening to music driving between races. I am a child of the Sixties, so it was 8-track tapes of Led Zeppelin, Motown, Joni Mitchell, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young."



1966

SHOULD HAVE BEEN great for the Beatles. Just before the new year, they released *Rubber Soul*, a stunning creative leap, and they followed it up with the even more dazzling *Revolver* in August. It was a one-two punch that rocked the pop world.

Across town, Mick Jagger furiously cribbed Paul McCartney songs. Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, whose sublime *Pet Sounds* came out between the two Beatles LPs, engaged in creative mortal combat with McCartney and had a mental breakdown. An entire generation of rockers was taken to school.

But for the Beatles, ’66 was a nightmare. Days after the release of *Revolver*, they embarked on a world tour so disastrous, the Philippine army chased them, Japanese crowds nearly trampled them to death, and evangelical Americans burned Beatles memorabilia after John Lennon said the band was more popular than Jesus. By the time they closed out the tour at Candlestick Park, they were cashed. They never toured again.

Back in England, they took a month-long break, hitting the Soho clubs, smoking weed, dropping acid—you know, Sixties stuff. But McCartney, that relentless overachiever and the only driving enthusiast in the group, looked at the Aston Martin DB5 in his London garage and did what you and I do when we want to clear our heads: He went on a solo road trip. No Beatles, no girlfriend, no fans, no dog, no roadie, not even a guitar.

But taking a solo road trip wasn’t easy for a Beatle in 1966—especially one driving an Aston Martin DB5. So McCartney consulted with the costume department from the sets of *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!* They fashioned a fake goatee for him and designed a Vaseline-slicked hairstyle. McCartney drove the DB5 from his London house to Lydd Airport in Kent, where it was loaded onto a Bristol Superfreighter air ferry, and sipped wine during the 45-minute flight across the channel to France.

He watched the DB5, with its beefy 4.0-liter straight-six and timeless curves, roll down the ramp in the breezy summer heat. “I was pretty proud of the car,” said McCartney, who was all of 24 years old that August. “It was a great motor for a young guy to have.”

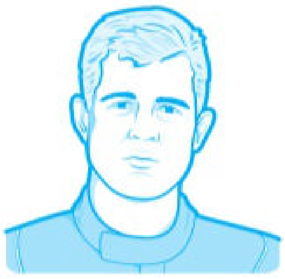
After clearing French customs, McCartney opened the Vaseline jar, combed the goop through his hair, adjusted the rearview mirror to center, and affixed the goatee with costumer’s glue. He then fired up the engine, slotted the five-speed ZF manual into first, and tore off down a succession of country roads that cut through cattle farms and fields of *haricots verts*. He stopped for coffee in quiet villages and pretended to read *Le Monde*. He smoked cigarettes, jotted in his journal, and presumably stroked his goatee like a normal non-Beatle. These were revelatory hours for McCartney, who hadn’t been alone for six years.

“I was a little lonely poet on the road with my car,” he said. “I’d cruise, find a hotel and park. . . . I would sit up in my room and write my journal. . . . I’d walk around the town and then in the evening go down to dinner, sit on my own at the table, at the height of all this Beatle thing. . . . re-taste anonymity . . . and think all sorts of artistic thoughts like, I’m on my own here.”

And so it went for two weeks, just McCartney thinking artistic thoughts, wheeling a DB5 from town to town, adjusting his goatee. His plan was to drive to Paris and Orléans and follow the Loire to Bordeaux, where he’d arranged to meet Beatles roadie Mal Evans at the town square.

A seed had been planted in France at the wheel of the DB5. On the flight home to London, as Evans slept, the seed germinated. Watching the evening lights of Europe pass beneath, it came to McCartney: The next Beatles album—what would be the greatest rock album ever made (go on with your wrong opinions)—wouldn’t be a Beatles album at all. Instead, four musicians would be the backup crew for a fellow named Sgt. Pepper.

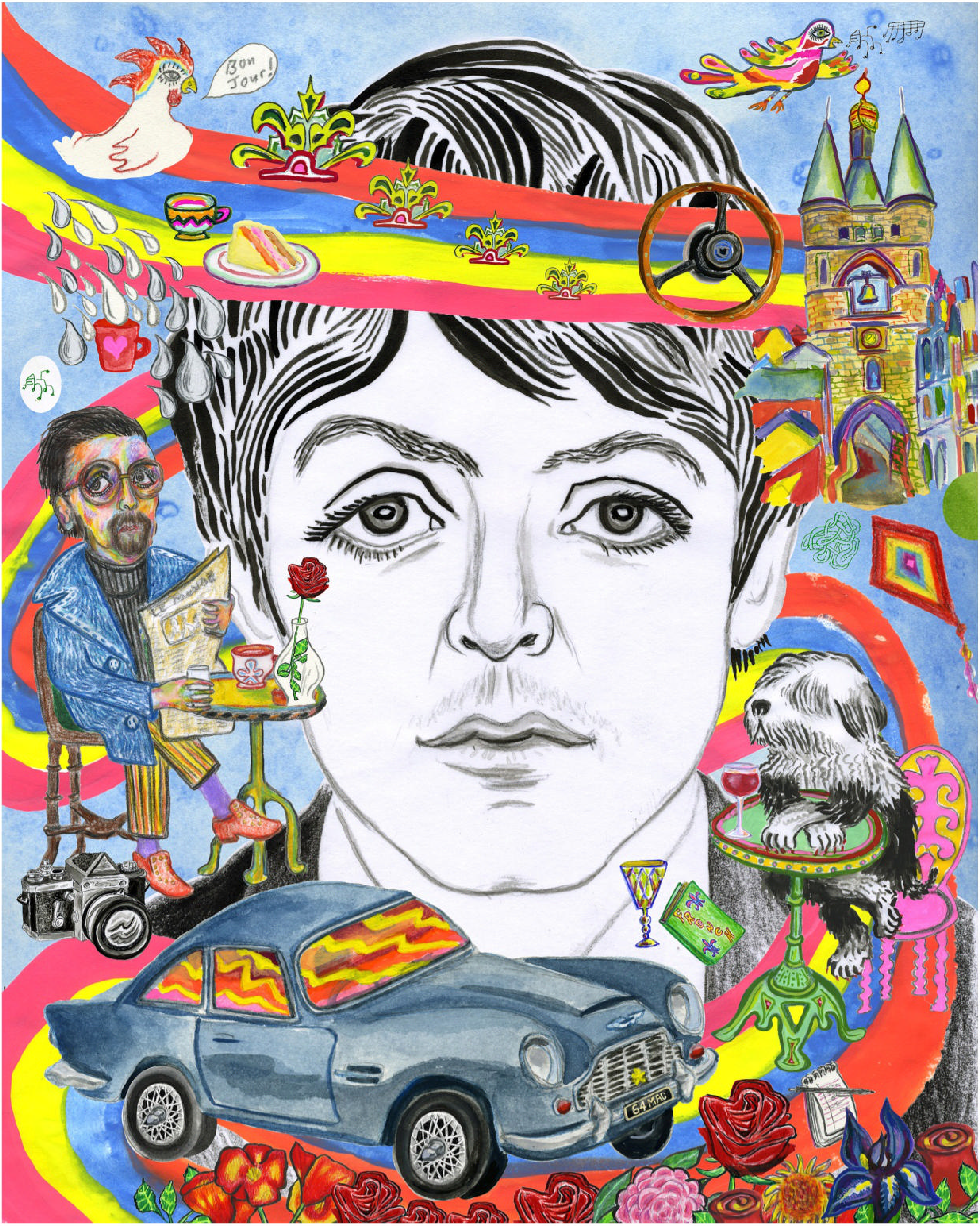
And that’s why we take road trips.



→ **RACER’S MUSIC**

Marcus Ericsson, 32, IndyCar

“Sometimes when I’m getting ready to race, I have a go-to band that is quite cool called Millencolin. They’re from Örebro, where I have an apartment in Sweden, next to my hometown, Kumla. It’s Swedish punk rock. I’ve seen them live in Brazil, Spain, and Australia.”


Bon Jour!
Le Monde
FRENCH
64 MAC

Sportsman
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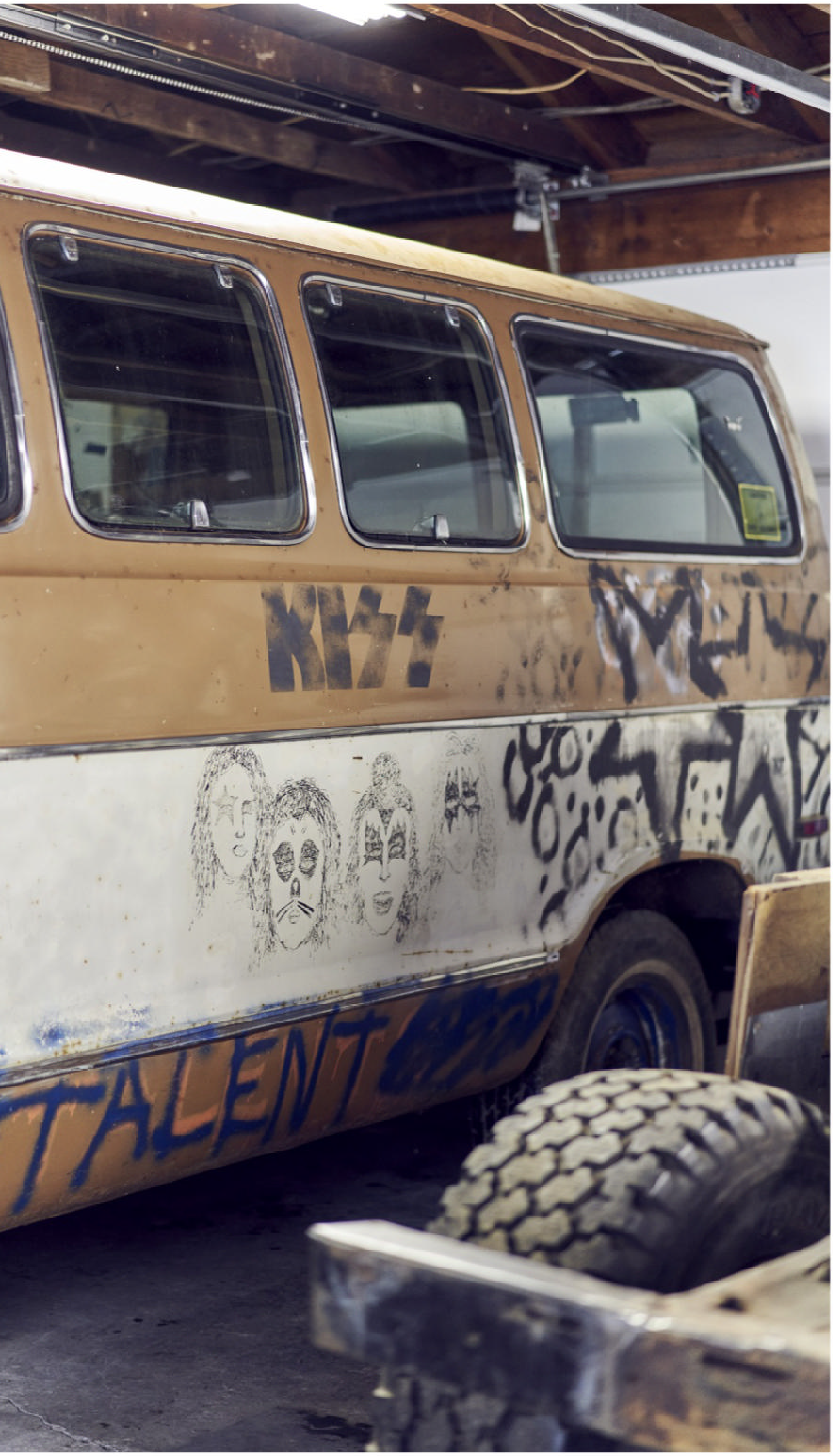
NO



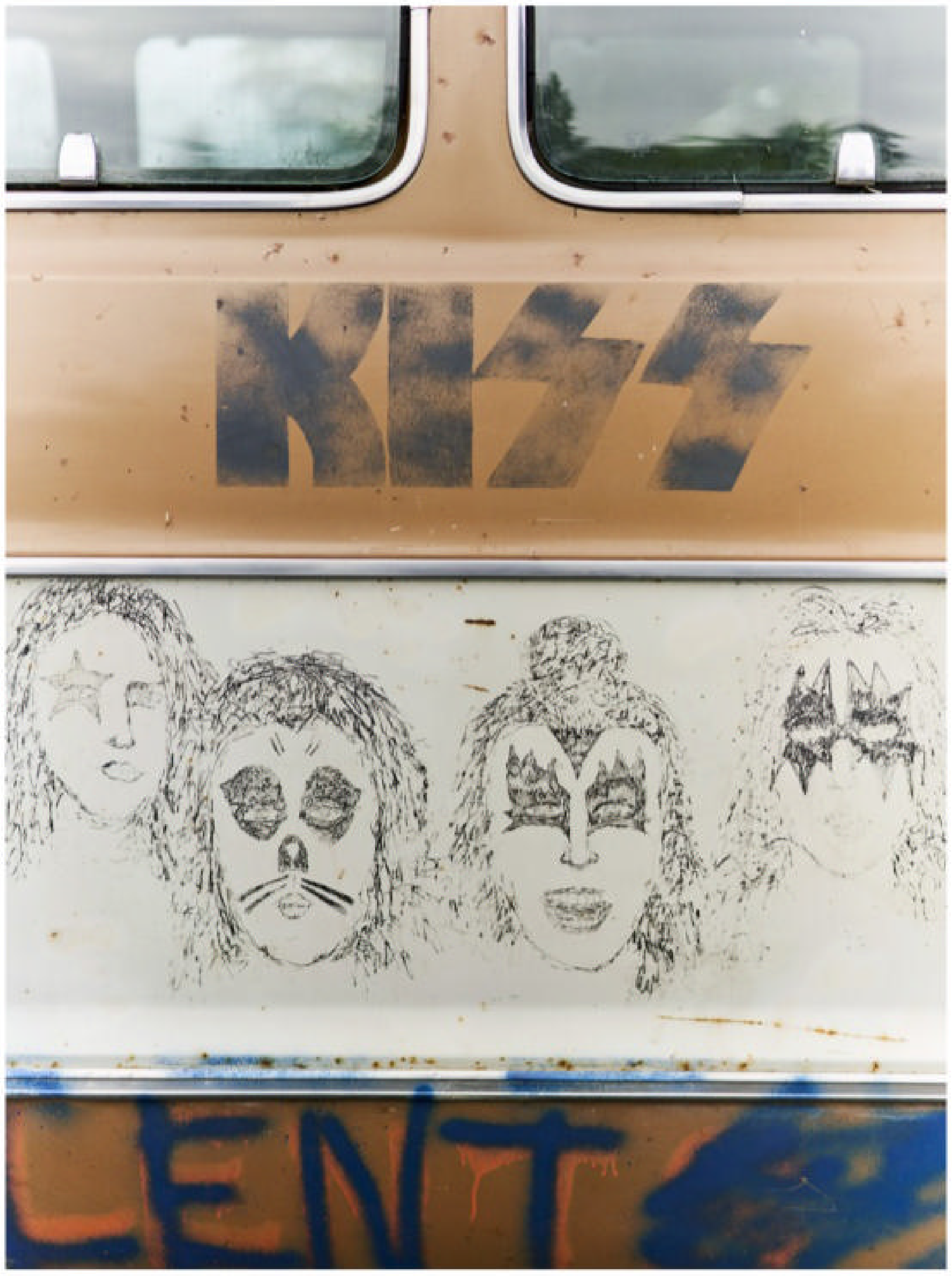
ABOUT A VAN

THE KURT COBAIN-DECORATED MELVAN IS THE ARCHETYPAL TOUR VAN, IN ALL ITS FILTHY CHARM.

BY **MIKE SPINELLI**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **IAN ALLEN**

A



B

THE GUITAR PLAYER wrenches the column shifter, and the van rolls drowsily out of suburbia. The singer farts and yells, “Window!” The bass player groans. A Fritos bag rustles. Black Flag rages on a boombox. The pedal drops. The engine wheezes. The highway opens up.

Another punk-rock concert tour is underway.

The dream of a musician’s life on the road may reflect in the stainless façade of a luxury tour bus, but more often, the reality plays out between the steel panels of a humble trade van. For decades, ladder-on-frame vans have carried payloads of impoverished punk, heavy-metal, indie, and other acts, like ramshackle, heat-seeking missiles homing in on a shadowy audience desperate to be found.

Aging tour vans supported young outfits that flamed out after a few gigs and those that launched the careers of legends. They helped put tiny music venues on the map—like O’Cayz Corral in Madison, Wisconsin, and the Grog Shop in Cleveland Heights, Ohio—and provided a moving platform for hard-working bands lacking chart success to sustain over time. One of those bands is the Melvins.

Formed in Washington State during the early Eighties, the Melvins, with their heavy experimental rock and album prolificacy, earned themselves a global following, which they’ve cultivated by touring relentlessly, usually in vans, for more than three decades.

These days, the Melvins crisscross the U.S. mostly in Mercedes-Benz Sprinter vans, according to drummer Dale Crover, but they started out in a two-tone 1972 Dodge Royal Sportsman once owned by singer and guitarist Buzz Osborne. Dubbed “the Melvan,” it hauled the band to gigs around central Washington, sometimes with a friend named Kurt Cobain at the wheel, and on the Melvins’ first nationwide tour in 1986.

“We were on this tour that we shouldn’t have been on at all,” Crover remembers. The Melvan “had already broken down a bunch before, many times. It was already old by then, and it was pretty beat-up. At every gas stop, it was a quart low of something.”

Mechanical issues were not the only burden the band endured in the Melvan. “It was definitely a cop magnet,” Crover says.

The Cobain connection made headlines in 2012, when the van’s then owner put the Melvan up for

A. Dodge vans have always been simple, almost-reliable transportation, whether taking a band to a gig or shuttling travelers to the airport.

B. Rendered in Sharpie, Cobain’s drawing of Kiss precisely captures Peter Criss’s sorrowful gaze.

→ RACER’S MUSIC

Austin Cindric, 24, NASCAR

“Music definitely plays a pretty big role in my life. I played in band in high school, a jazz band, and I played the tuba. After I won the Daytona 500 [in 2022], I got a text from my band teacher congratulating me, and I replied with, ‘Mr. Davis, you’ll be happy to know the morning of the 500, I woke up and listened to Lester Young.’”

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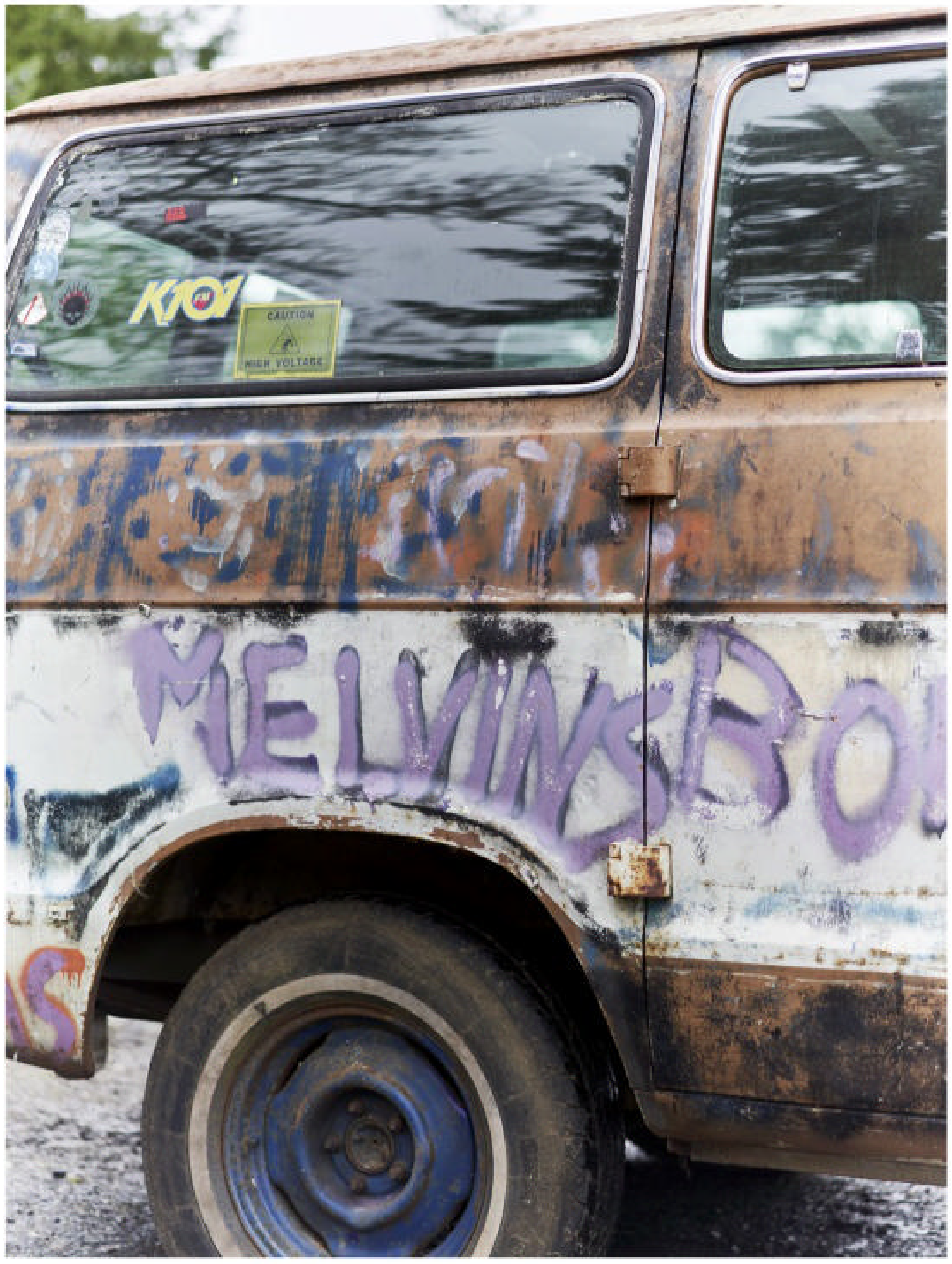


A

B

auction. According to provenance, Cobain had used a Sharpie to sketch portraits of the members of Kiss in full Seventies-era makeup on the van's side, making it an artifact in his deeply examined rise from Aberdeen punk kid to immortal rock god.

Cobain's contribution was perhaps too ephemeral to elevate the Melvan to big-ticket memorabilia; it eventually sold for a fraction of its initial six-figure reserve in a private transaction to a couple in Olympia, Washington. (They also own an apartment where Cobain once lived.)

Recently, pop-culture YouTuber ScottOnTape visited the Melvan at its current home in a remote three-car garage outside Olympia. Scott, who declined to give his last name, produced a walk-around video, uncovering the 50-year-old Sportsman after a decade out of the spotlight.

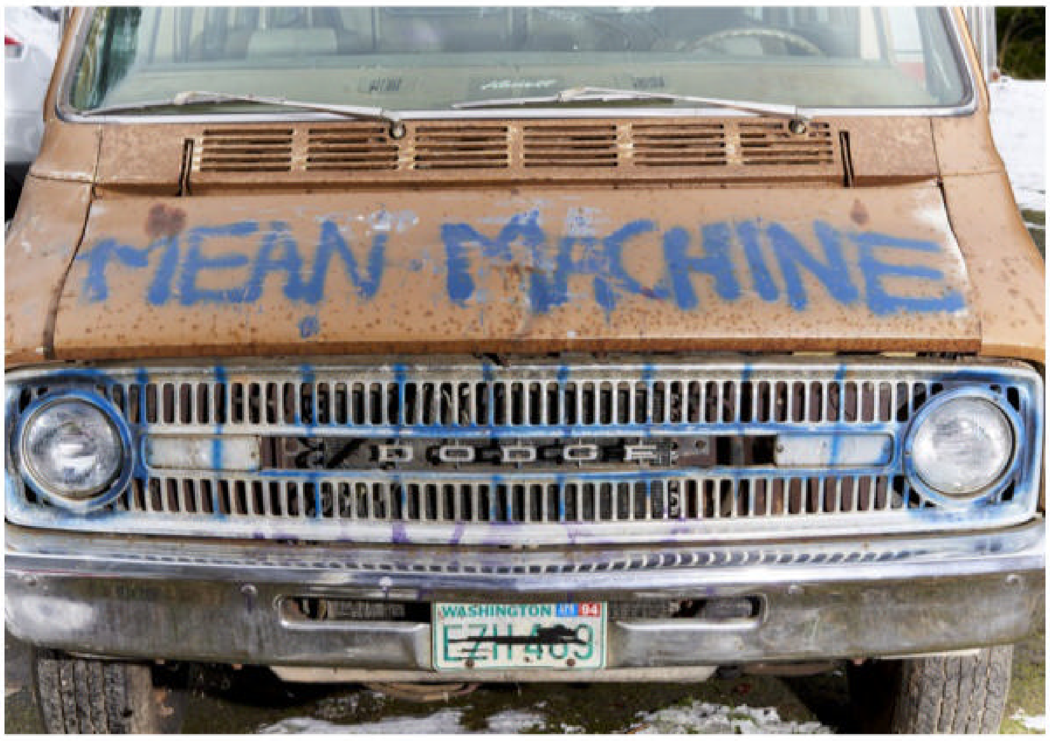
The Melvan hasn't been driven in at least 25 years, according to its owners. Save for Cobain's sketch, the exterior is a pastiche of spray-can graffiti, dirt, scratches, and rust patina. The upholstery covering its bucket seats is shredded. There's surface rust on the ceiling and an "I Brake for Rodeos" bumper sticker below one of its picture windows. Extending across the cargo floor is a filthy pea-green carpet whose fibers, it's fair to assume, bear untold substances.

Indeed, ravaged by disuse and time, the Melvan doesn't rate much as a mode of transportation. Still, considering its origin story, there's a case to be made that it is the archetype by which all other punk-rock tour vans might be judged.

"To some people, this is just an old, cruddy van," Scott narrated in his video, "but this is music history right here."

A. It aged exactly like you'd expect of grunge royalty.
B. The *Road & Track* van (which doesn't exist, but should) would definitely wear an *R&T* sticker.
C. The front end speaks for itself.

C



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A

BY **KYLE KINARD**

THE GONG SHOW

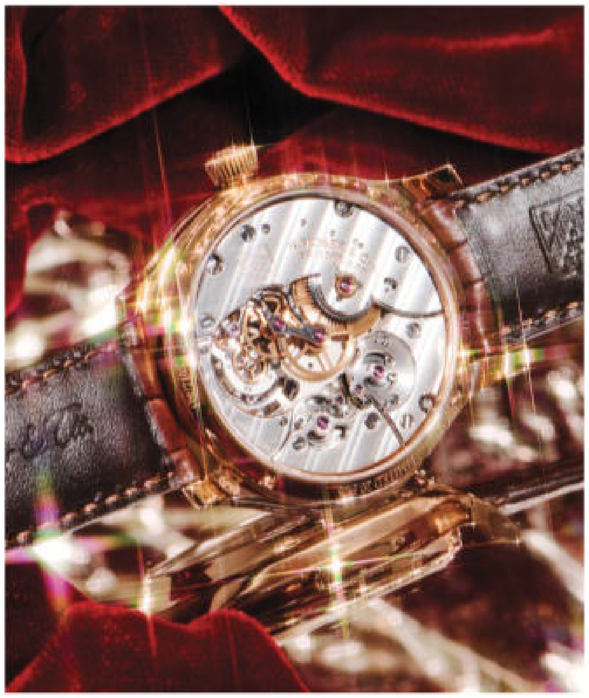
THIS WATCH ALLOWS YOU TO TELL TIME WITH YOUR EARS.

WATCHES ARE GENERALLY polite little objects, quiet except for the movement's whispering *tick tick tick*. Some watches, however, are not content to remain hushed.

This H. Moser & Cie. belongs to a class of watches called minute repeaters, which, in addition to visual indicators like hour and minute hands, can signal time audibly via tiny chimes. At the press of a button on the case's flank, the timepiece relays the hours, quarter hours, and minutes with a cheerful progression of dings. It's complicated to achieve without a computer chip. As such, among many watch enthusiasts, the minute repeater is considered the pinnacle of mechanical watchmaking.

Moser puts that mastery on display here. Mechanically actuated hammers strike the minute repeater's small gongs, as the company calls them. The hammers are the bits that look like a pair of polished steel antlers at the watch's 10 o'clock position. Notice the gongs, those thin coils of metal curling around the outside of the dial. The design of the gong and hammers separates one minute repeater from another, as do a slew of other variables, like case material and movement architecture. But at its core, the minute repeater is designed to tickle that most unlikely tool for telling time: your ears. &

A. H. Moser & Cie. Endeavour Concept Minute Repeater, h-moser.com, $365,000 in either red gold or titanium.
B. The Moser's hand-wound caliber, shown in all its glitzy glory.



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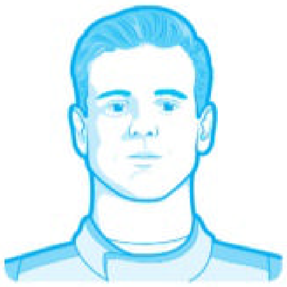


→ **RACER'S MUSIC**

Mick Schumacher, 23, F1

"I listen to different genres depending on my mood. Rascal Flatts, 'Life Is a Highway.' Away from the track, I'm slowly learning to play the guitar, and 'Stairway to Heaven' by Led Zeppelin is one of the songs I'm really trying hard to master. There's some Tame Impala, Frank Ocean, and Giveon in there as well—they're artists I listen to a lot at the moment and keep hitting repeat. 'It Wasn't Me' by Shaggy. It should feature on everyone's playlist—a classic!"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LINDSAY KREIGHBAUM**

THE JOE WALSH EFFECT

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS SHOUT-OUTS TO A CAR IN A SONG LYRIC HELPED MASERATI THROUGH SOME VERY LEAN TIMES.

→ **RACER'S MUSIC**

Lando Norris, 23, F1
"I listen to more chilled-out music with low intensity before a race; it helps me relax. In my free time, I've recently started DJing. I'm still new to it, but I love it and get to meet some great people. I've met DJs like Marshmello and Zedd, but Martin Garrix got me my first DJ set, so I owe it to him."

BETTER THAN THE BEACH BOYS’ boasts about that deuce coupe. More casual swag than Rick Ross’s shine on the Maybach. Bolder than Beck’s clumsy Lothario taking his shot with a Hyundai. Even Prince’s deft moves on a hard-to-handle Chevy somehow fall short of the sheer torque created by Joe Walsh’s nonchalant FM-radio brag about an underdog Italian sports car.

“My Maserati does one eighty-five,” Joe Walsh sings on “Life’s Been Good.” These were not lyrics that needed to be deciphered or deconstructed. They were facts, a plain-spoken accounting of the louche life of a late-century rock ’n’ roll hedonist. “I lost my license,” he continued (on the carbon-slim chance that you can’t sing along at home), “now I don’t drive.” The song lingered on the *Billboard* charts for several months in 1978, earning rock-canon status and perpetual FM rotation that remains pervasive today. It was also the rare pop-cultural marketing windfall with enough *forza* to save a struggling automaker.

In 1978, Joe Walsh climbed from the wreckage of the Eagles long enough to release a four-minute memoir that painted a picture of a luxe,

BY **MARK HEALY**

CORVETTE
A

spiritually bankrupt rock-god fantasy life that every Seventies American boy I knew would give a testicle to experience. "Life's Been Good" confirmed everything we hoped was true about rock 'n' roll excess—groupies, drugs, trashed hotel rooms. It informed the sum total of everything we knew about Maseratis to that point: They were Italian, they hauled ass, and they were decadent enough for rock stars. This was an era of peak guitar-rock stardom. Album sales were counted in the millions, and groups like Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones traveled in plush, private commercial jets with their band logos painted on the side. From the back seat of my mom's used Buick Century wagon, a Maserati sounded like salvation.

Maybe other kids had cooler parents with Italian friends who came over to smoke and gesticulate at the family dinner table—maybe *they* knew of this Maserati. But in the American Everytown where I grew up, Maserati was meaningless pre-Walsh. And with good reason: Italy in the Seventies, with its gas crises, labor disputes, and punishing luxury taxes, had offered anything but la dolce vita for any ambitious car company.

So by the mid-Seventies, Maserati was practically an international ghost. There was no marketing budget and no new actual cars to market. In 1974, the carmaker sold only 150 cars in its home country, and it went into liquidation a year later. By the time "Life's Been Good" was soaring up the charts, Maseratis were harder to find than burrata in a Vermont supermarket.

In August 1975, De Tomaso leveraged some backing from the Italian government and committed to resurrecting Maserati, starting by rebranding its own Longchamp in the form of the Maserati Kyalami, which arrived to little fanfare in 1976. *Road & Track* didn't even review it.

"Maserati is one of the grandes dames of Italian racing," says Santo Spadaro of Domenick European Car Repair in White Plains, New York. "But if you showed people the Maserati trident, most people would say 'Neptune.' Meanwhile, Ferrari's Prancing Horse is one of the world's most recognized brands, like McDonald's and Coca-Cola."

Like his son does now, Spadaro's father repaired most of the Ferraris and Maseratis around New York. Santo turned 15 the year "Life's Been Good" came out, and while he was thrilled to hear FM radio intersect with the family business, he doubts it helped the company bridge those lean years. "People buying sports cars then wore three-piece suits," he says. "I don't think they were moved by pop and rock."

Still, as for building brand awareness among future Maserati buyers, no expensive ad campaign (even if Maserati had the money to pay for one) could have matched the impact that Walsh's raunchy guitar and tale of jaded, faded stardom delivered for free.

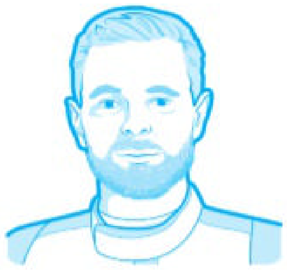
And it might have helped the company close the enthusiasm gap just enough to carry it into the Biturbo era, when Maserati started exporting cars again in the form of 1982's twin-turbocharged V-6 notchback. *R&T* wrote at the time: "The new 4-seat notchback coupe certainly will not disgrace Maserati's performance image, at least not if the manufacturer's claims of 180 bhp DIN at 3500 rpm and 2425 lb curb weight are to be believed. This results in a claimed 133.5-mph maximum speed and 0–100 km/h (0–62 mph) in 6.5 seconds."

I'm sorry. What's the maximum speed again? One thirty-what . . . ? Even the mid-engine V-8 Bora of the Seventies couldn't break 180 mph. It doesn't matter. Walsh, who never claimed his ode to the good life to be a work of journalism, didn't own and had probably never even driven a Maserati when he wrote the song. In fact, Maserati's main value as a lyric is its inherent exoticism and its four syllables. For the first and perhaps only time ever, it had rhythm Ferrari didn't.

A couple of years ago, Walsh told *Rolling Stone* that he eventually bought a 1964 5000GT, having been slightly shamed by the song's success. "Everyone was making me feel really guilty," he said, when he'd confess to not owning the car. "The look of sadness on their face." So he got himself a Maserati.

"I don't know if it does 185," Walsh admitted. "I chickened out at 140." ®

ILLUSTRATION BY **JOHN VINCENT ARANDA**



→ **RACER'S MUSIC**

Kevin Magnussen, 30, F1
"Chuck Berry, 'Johnny B. Goode.' I play it a lot. My daughter loves the guitar—at the beginning, you can see her face light up, and she starts dancing. My mum is a huge Elvis fan, so we listened to a lot of it, and I'm a big fan myself. There's also Danish music, but nobody would know it. System of a Down, 'Chop Suey!' It brings out the same mood you're in when you're in the car—this super-wild, aggressive mood. Mary J Blige, 'One.' It's a killer song, and it's the first that comes to mind when thinking of a favorite song."

MOTOCROSS MAMA

HOW THE COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER

LORETTA LYNN'S REIGN as the queen of country music began with her first record in 1960 and continued until her death in 2022 at age 90. Along the way, she racked up awards for her lyrics, albums, and performances. Lynn is in eight entertainment-industry halls of fame, but one of her most recent honors was for a soundtrack of 125-cc two-strokes and the roar of a crowd. In 2021, the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame inducted Lynn in recognition of her role in the sport's history.

While motocross's amateur-crown event is officially the Monster Energy AMA Amateur National Motocross Championship, everyone calls it Loretta Lynn's, so fundamental was her connection.

"There are other big amateur races, but Loretta Lynn's is the most important," says Brett Smith, founder and editor of the *We Went Fast* motocross history podcast.

The roster of past racers at Loretta Lynn's includes motorcycle champions like Colin Edwards and Travis Pastrana, unexpected names like Robert "Vanilla Ice" Van Winkle, and four-wheeled legends too. Seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champ Jimmie Johnson remembers the race back in 1985: "It was just a great place to be a kid, surrounded by hundreds, maybe thousands of other kids, all there to race."

A great place for kids' racing was on "Big Dave" Coombs's mind when he pulled into an empty campground back in 1981 on the way home from a frustrating event in Ponca City, Oklahoma. "We were newbies. There was a lot of favoritism at those early races. We didn't have a very good time," says Davey Coombs, son of Big Dave and editor of *Racer X* magazine. "Dad decided he was going to build a stand-alone event somewhere in the middle of the country at a place where no one could rent the track out the week before, where local riders wouldn't have any advantage from someone coming from across the country."

That place turned out to be Loretta Lynn's ranch in Hurricane Mills, Tennessee. The senior Coombs struck up a friendship with Mooney Lynn, Loretta's husband and manager, and the Lynn family has hosted the race since 1982. Loretta was no rider herself, at least not that anyone can recall, but it didn't stop her from making a memorable entrance. "One year her son-in-law Alan rode her into the riders' meeting on the back of a Kawasaki KX 250," says Davey, who doesn't remember ever seeing her on a bike otherwise. "It was probably the shortest riding career ever to get in the hall of fame."

She may not have been on track, but Loretta often stopped by to talk with the racers, occasionally performed, and was present via music, even when not in person. "The announcer would play 'Coal Miner's Daughter' over the PA every morning before the first motos," says Davey. "That's become a tradition. You don't hear anything until 7 a.m.; then it's Loretta over the loudspeaker. That song has become an anthem for amateur motocross. Our demographic leans more toward rock 'n' roll, I think it's fair to say, but Loretta Lynn's name is synonymous with the biggest motocross race in the world." &

A

JONES GOGGLES
DAUGHTER

BY **ELANA SCHERR**

A. For most people, Loretta Lynn doesn't conjure the image of dirt bikes and the wail of a two-stroke. But for a certain group, their first taste of country came with the smell of premix.
B. The first event at Loretta Lynn's in 1982 was a muddy affair.
C. A normal start line with a legendary namesake.
D. For 41 years, this has been the premier event on the amateur motocross calendar. While Lynn has died, the race known as Loretta Lynn's will remain a mainstay.

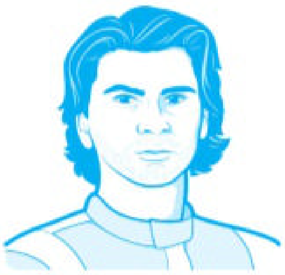
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MX SPORTS

BECAME THE MOTHER OF DIRT-BIKE RACING.

B

C

D



→ RACER'S MUSIC

Colton Herta, 22, IndyCar
"Most of what I listen to before a race is similar to what I listen to when I work out. I'll go first with 'F.V.K.' [Fearless Vampire Killers] from Bad Brains. Then 'Song for the Dead' by Queens of the Stone Age. The last one I'm going to go with is called 'Monument' by Bambara. They're all very fast."

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SECTION 2 PLAYLIST:

"Pharaoh's Dance" Miles Davis / "Why Does the Sun Really Shine?" They Might Be Giants / "Bone Machine" Pixies
"Method Man" Wu-Tang Clan / "Sympathy for the Devil" The Rolling Stones
"Rebel Music (3 O'Clock Roadblock)" Bob Marley and the Wailers / "Helplessly Hoping" Crosby, Stills & Nash
"Long May You Run" The Stills-Young Band / "Legend Has It" Run the Jewels / "Can't Find My Way Home" Blind Faith

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADAM G, TRÜF**

RUNNING THE VOODOO DOWN

· BY JOE LEVY ·

MIL
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
BRUCE MORSER

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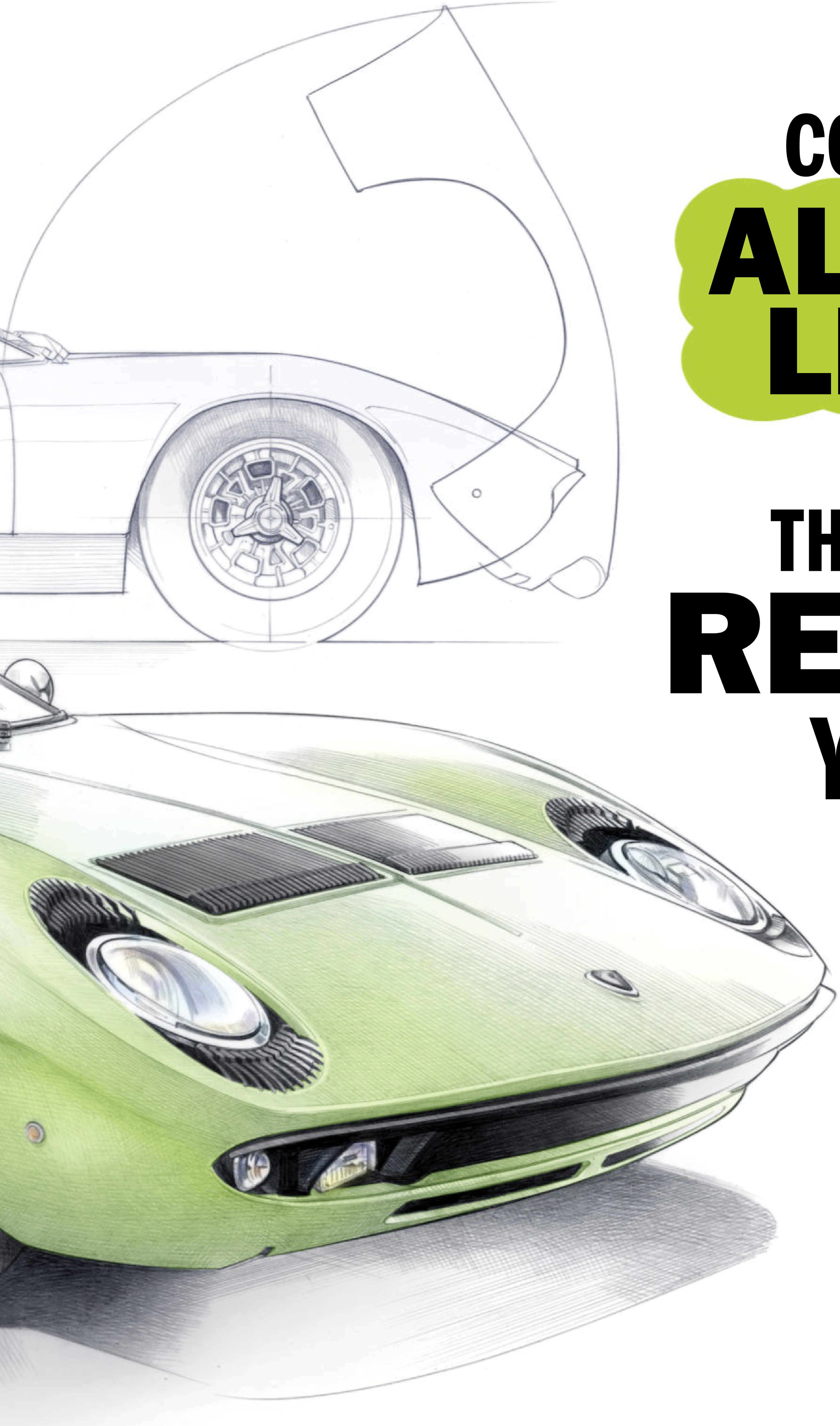
ROAD & TRACK
VOL. 15 ★ 042



“THIS CAR COULD MAKE ALL THE LIGHTS BEFORE THEY TURNED RED OR YELLOW.”

—MILES DAVIS

Lamborghini Miura

Davis blasted around New York in his lime-green Miura until one night in 1972, when he crashed hard just off the West Side Highway, severely damaging the car, as well as his legs.

HIS FIRST RIDE WAS A HORSE.

Growing up, Miles Davis spent summers in Noble Lake, Arkansas, where his grandfather gave him his own horse at age seven. Horseback riding, like trumpet improvisation, required skill and sensitivity, physical prowess and keen mental attunement, knowledge acquired through hours of practice and experience. When Davis arrived in New York—at age 18, in September 1944, to pursue his trumpet studies at Juilliard, or so his parents thought—the first thing he did was go looking for Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. The second thing was search for horse stables, which he found on the Upper West Side. "The attendants looked at me strange, I guess because they weren't used to seeing a black person coming to ride horses," he later wrote. "But I just figured that was their problem."

Miles Davis was a frontiersman. He had influences but no antecedent, followers but no true inheritors. His music opened doors into spaces no one else thought, or dared, to explore. Sometimes it did this with delicate precision, sometimes with stomping freedom, using electronics to map new territory far outside of existing traditions. But once he seized control of his art, he pursued a music without limitations. He didn't want to play in jazz clubs. He needed bigger spaces, younger audiences, louder sounds. He was restless, changing, aesthetically omnivorous. He shifted his sound. His clothes. He was Dylan before Dylan, Bowie before Bowie. He dared others to keep up.

And one thing linked it all: the life he led, the music he made, the clothes he wore, and the smart—almost perfect—series of cars he drove over the course of his life.

"My motion had to be forward." These are some of the first words in his autobiography.

So the problem of seeing a Black man on a horse only grew when his art brought real money and he traded up in horsepower. Even when he was famous, people—the police, in particular—looked at him strangely because they weren't used to seeing a Black man behind the wheel of a Ferrari 275 GTB/4 or a Lamborghini Miura. "By me having a $60,000 yellow Ferrari, being black and living in a beachfront house in Malibu, the police have already stopped me three times," he told Quincy Troupe in 1985 for an article in *Spin*. "This happens all the time. They're always saying they thought I was drunk, that I was weaving all over the place. This happens especially at night on the Pacific Coast Highway."

There were almost as many such stories as there were cars, and there were a lot of cars. He used the first royalty check from his first album on Columbia, 1957's *'Round About Midnight*, to purchase a blue Mercedes 190SL. The car winked at him, he said, from the showroom floor every time he passed it. And so he made it his. This love, though, was not long lasting, and he soon replaced the Mercedes with a Jaguar XK120. But that romance was also short lived. The Jaguar had too many limitations. He'd bought a home at 312 West 77th Street, and when he turned onto the West Side Highway off of 96th Street, the Jag simply didn't have the pop he needed.

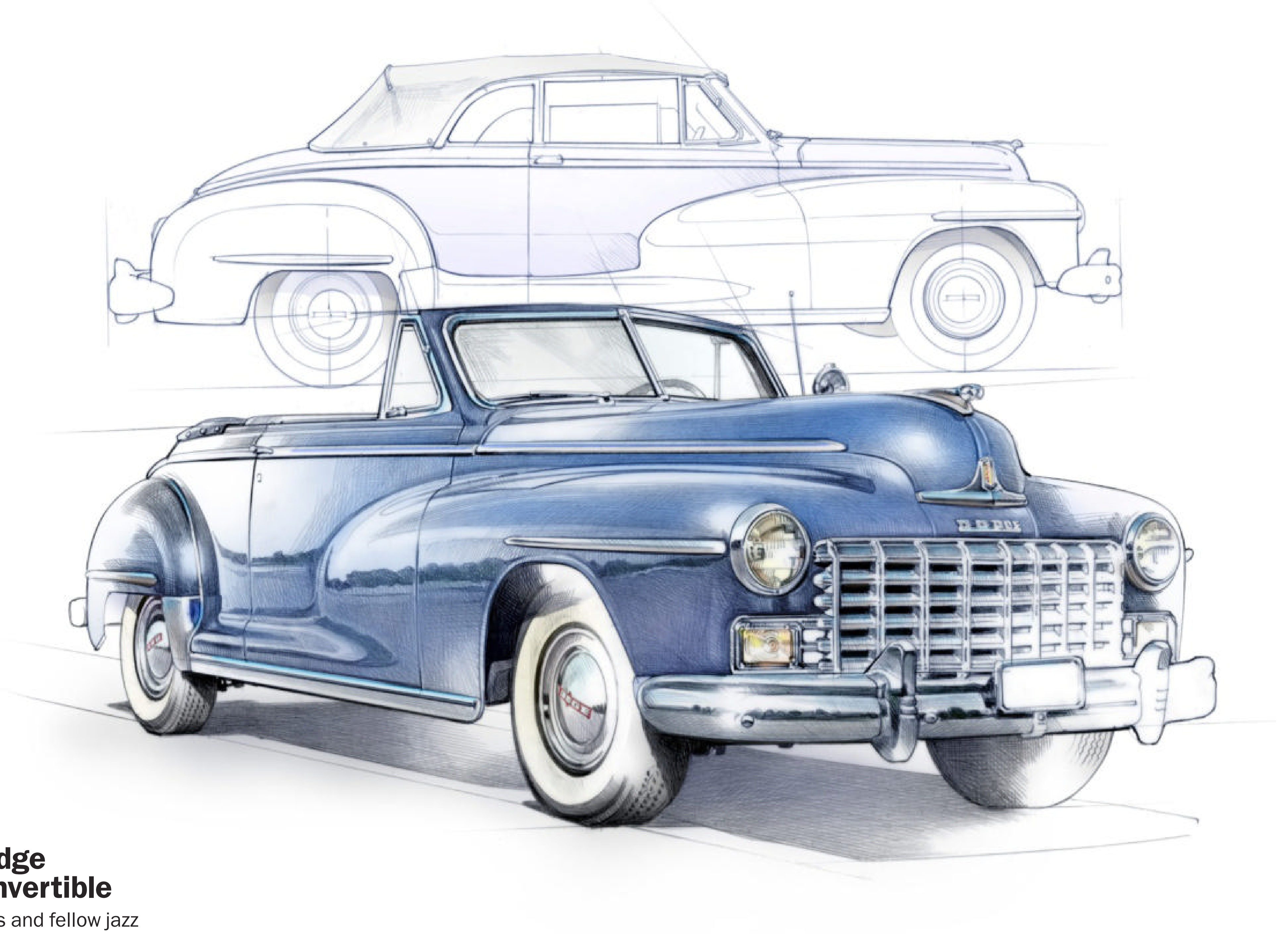
And so, in 1958, he bought his first Ferrari. A friend, Allen Eager, had introduced him to Luigi Chinetti's Ferrari showroom. Eager was a saxophonist who'd played with Charlie Parker. Eager, who was white, taught horseback riding and loved cars so much that in 1961, he took first in the GT division at the 12 Hours of Sebring, driving a Ferrari 250 GT alongside the one and only Denise McCluggage, who had her own friendship with Davis.

At Chinetti's Ferrari showroom, Davis fell in love. And this was a love that would never fade. He'd spend hours in Chinetti's place, moving from car to car to see how each felt, discussing the particulars of the engines, watching the mechanics in the garage.

His first Ferrari was white, not red. Buying off the showroom floor was still out of reach, so he spent $8500 (about $88,000 in today's dollars) on a used one. He did not save this car, or any of the Ferraris or Lamborghinis that followed, for weekend use. He drove it everywhere. For any gig that wasn't on the West Coast, he would arrive in style. He enjoyed showing off what it could do—or more precisely, what he could do with it—to his

A

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Dodge convertible

Davis and fellow jazz great Sonny Rollins prowled around town in a 1948 Dodge convertible nicknamed the “Blue Demon.”

passengers. In 1960, he drove the Ferrari down to Philadelphia for a show. While there, he picked up saxophonist Jimmy Heath, a Philly native who also loved cars. The two rode around town, talking about music, Davis complaining that Sonny Stitt—his current sax player—was screwing up on “So What,” the opening cut on *Kind of Blue*, then just a year into its reign as the best-selling jazz album of all time.

“I was showing him how fast the car ran on Broad Street, where the speed limit is about twenty-five miles an hour,” Davis remembered in his autobiography. “I told Jimmy this car could make all the lights before they turned red or yellow. So I gear down and the car is moving at fifty-five miles an hour before he could blink, right? His eyes were bulging out of his head and we’re making all the motherfucking lights. The car is moving so fast and low it’s just whistling. We’re going real fast and run up on a light that changes and I got to hit my brakes, right? But I know what I got, and I know the brakes are going to hold and we’re going to stop on a motherfucking dime. So I gear down from about sixty miles an hour and stop on a dime . . . like I knew it would, and Jimmy just couldn’t believe it.” Next to them were two cops, who rousted them looking for drugs (the two musicians had pursued both music and heroin together in the past; Heath was on parole, and Davis was six years past his habit, though cocaine was part of his life). The cops found nothing, but as always, Davis was a Black man with power, style, and speed to spare, and they were there. “Man, it was a drag.”

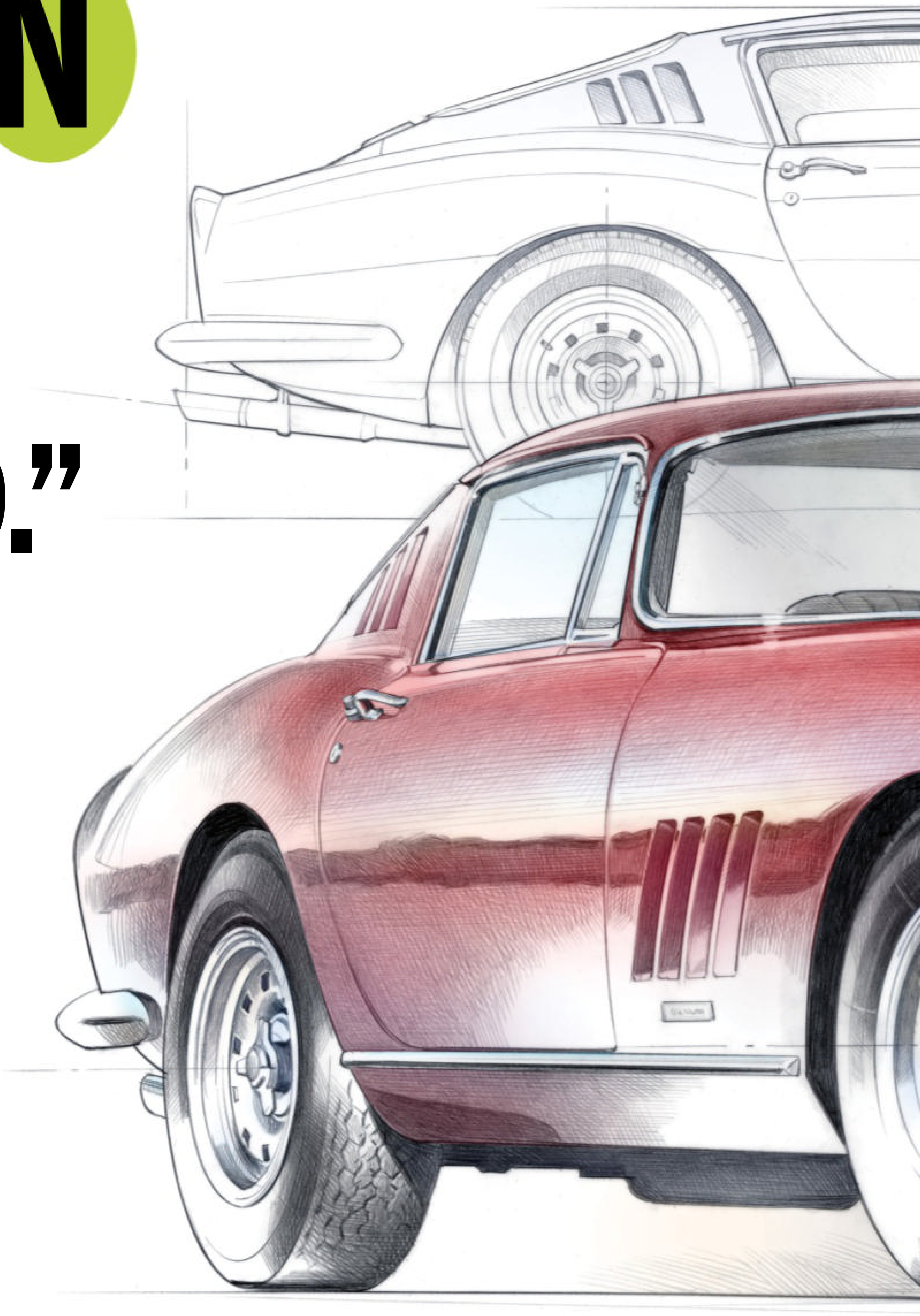
The Ferrari 275 was one of a handful that Davis owned—there was a 308 and a Testarossa in his collection, along with his first car, a 1948 Dodge convertible that Sonny Rollins nicknamed the “Blue Demon.” They used to roll around town copping heroin in it, but soon enough the dope meant that car was repossessed.

The propulsion he found so captivating in cars—the feeling of moving forward—turned to his music. In the mid-Fifties, after a decade of playing that included the landmark *Birth of the Cool* sessions, Davis began playing with a mute, cultivating a whole new mystique of quiet, stealthy precision.

“In a time when the trumpet player symbolized a certain kind of modern man—a high, loud, and virile player, technically proficient, a master of this piece of instrumental machinery—Miles played soft and low, turning the trumpet into an organic extension of himself, hitting wrong notes along the way as though to remind the audience that it was a human

A. In his performance at the 1969 Newport Jazz Festival, Davis previewed two compositions he would later record for one of his most influential albums, *Bitches Brew*.

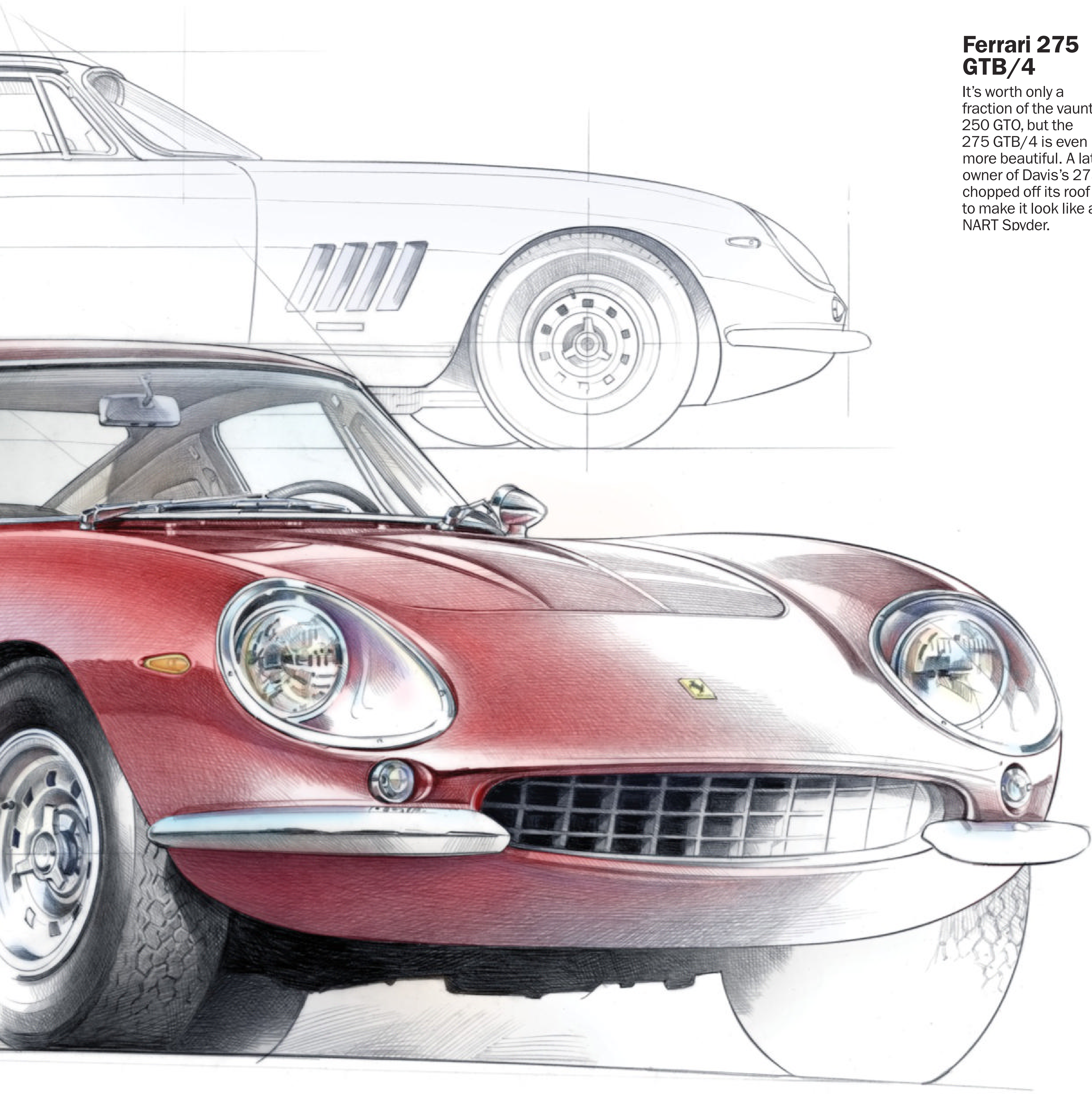
“MY MOTION HAD TO BE FORWARD.”



performance and not a didactic essay on modernism,” wrote John Szwed in the biography *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*.

Playing with a mute allowed him to push his horn right up to the microphone when recording, which created a new level of intimacy. It also created a great sense of anticipation around his every pause. “He sensed that a mike could be used like a close-up lens in motion pictures, focusing and amplifying small gestures and emotions,” Szwed wrote. “When people play with mutes, everything sounds relaxed,” the pianist, arranger, composer, and Davis confidant Gil Evans said. “But with Miles there’s an extraordinary tension.”

Davis kicked heroin and became serious about boxing around the same time, in 1954. He said it was the example of middleweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson—a glamorous ladies man when on the town and a no-smiling champion in the ring—that helped him do it. Davis became friends with Sugar Ray, watching him train and hanging out at the bar Robinson owned on Seventh Avenue and 123rd Street in Harlem. Like Davis, Robinson was an immense car fan, famously buying a 1950 Cadillac and having it painted a shade of pink to match a tie he liked. When around 1960 Davis



Ferrari 275 GTB/4

It’s worth only a fraction of the vaunted 250 GTO, but the 275 GTB/4 is even more beautiful. A later owner of Davis’s 275 chopped off its roof to make it look like a NART Spyder.

bought the building at 312 West 77th Street in Manhattan, a five-story former Russian Orthodox church, he put a music room and a gym in the basement. There he'd begin his days jumping rope, doing bag work, and using a rowing machine. "You have to have rhythm and good time to do both," he said, comparing boxing to music. "Doing exercise makes you think clear and your blood circulate. It makes you think stronger, feel stronger, and you can play whatever instrument you play with greater strength, whether it's right or wrong." Boxing, he said, was "like practicing a musical instrument; you have to keep practicing, over and over again."

He saw in boxing the flow state—that feeling of energized, focused immersion that can transform or slow time, leaving more room to engage both intellect and instinct, or bringing a sense of ease and play to split-second reactions. The flow state—the hyperfocus that race-car drivers also search for—provides common ground in horseback riding, fast cars, boxing, and musical improvisation.

On the night of August 18, 1969, Davis and some of his band ran through a tune or two at his home and then sat watching fight films. The next day they began the recording sessions for a new album project. It was known at first as *Listen to This*, but as it grew in size and scope from a single to a double album, it acquired a new title: *Bitches Brew*.

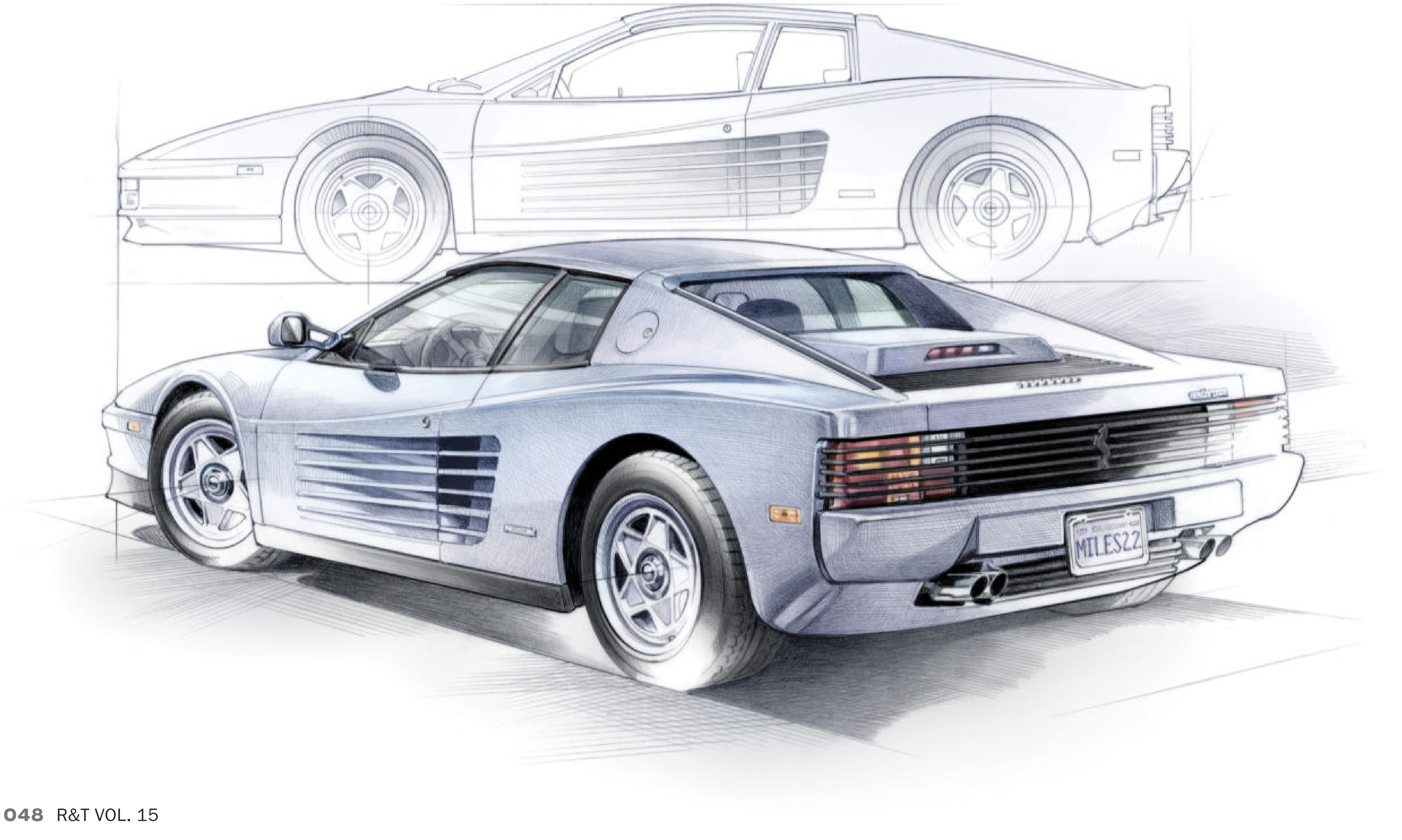
More than a decade before, Davis saw Les Ballets Africains from Guinea, and he was electrified by the way the drummers layered polyrhythms that both drove and reacted to the dancers' movements. "I didn't want to copy that, but I got a concept from it," he remembered. Throughout the Sixties, he shifted his music away from the melodic and toward the rhythmic, particularly once 17-year-old drummer Tony Williams ("one of the baddest motherfuckers who had ever played a set of drums") joined his band in 1963. Williams played polyrhythms all the time, and he played on top of the beat, just ahead of it, giving everything an edge. On the title track of 1968's *Nefertiti*, Davis told the band that the horns would play saxophonist Wayne Shorter's melody, not solo, freeing the rhythm section—Williams, pianist Herbie Hancock, and bassist Ron Carter—to explore in any direction. It was subtly revolutionary; without changing the instrumentation or volume of his group in any way, Davis completely inverted jazz.

And then he began to change the instrumentation and volume of his group, composing and recording with a Fender Rhodes electric piano and adding electric bass and guitar into the mix.

A

Ferrari Testarossa

Davis really embraced the Eighties. He owned a cheese-grater Testarossa and appeared, in the role of a pimp, on the era's quintessential television program, *Miami Vice*.



B

C

A. Davis began using a trumpet mute in the mid-Fifties, and it became a fundamental part of his sound for the remainder of his career.

B. Probably the only time Davis went slowly in a car was when he was not behind the wheel.

C. Not a physically large man, Davis was nonetheless an imposing figure. Here he talks with 17-year-old drumming phenom Tony Williams in 1963.

"I was beginning to listen to a lot of James Brown," he remembered. He was also beginning to see the woman who would become his second wife, Betty Mabry, whose impact on him was immense. She was a model, a singer, and a songwriter. She introduced him to Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix—not just to their music, but to Stone and Hendrix themselves—and he began to shop where Hendrix shopped, trading custom-made Italian suits for African dashikis. Mabry appears on the cover of Davis's *Filles de Kilimanjaro*; the final cut, "Mademoiselle Mabry," recorded in September 1968, was based on Hendrix's "The Wind Cries Mary."

"I wanted to make the sound more like rock," Davis said of his next album, *In a Silent Way*, released in 1969. It was possible to miss this intention. The music was—as the title indicated—contemplative, a combination of psychedelia's exploration of inner space and James Brown's rhythm innovations. But with *Bitches Brew*, there was no mistaking the intention. For one thing, the guitarist John McLaughlin, who played with a delicate touch on *In a Silent Way*, was unleashed here, delivering sharp rhythm chords and solo excursions at the edge of feedback, sometimes slipping over that edge, his guitar matching the aggressive power of Davis's trumpet blasts. This music wasn't for contemplation. This was music for conjuring, recalling nothing so much as Davis's walks through the Arkansas darkness when he was six years old. "That blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing," he remembered in his autobiography. He'd heard the calls of ghosts in the trees mingling with the unmistakable heavy breathing of sex. Only now he was in command of the mystery, not subject to it.

Davis thickened his sound with two drummers, two bass players, three keyboardists on electric piano, two percussionists, two reed players, and guitar. He put the drummers next to each other and arranged the musicians in a semicircle around them, with himself in the middle. And he conducted the music, gesturing with his hands or a look. "There were grunts, glances, smiles and no smiles," said keyboardist Chick Corea. "Miles communicated, but not on a logical or analytical level."

Some of the musicians had rehearsed this music, but not all. The element of the unknown was crucial here, with the musicians working from what Davis called musical sketches—simple chords—and given general instructions about tone color, nothing more. There were no set structures, no verses or choruses. The music lived in the moment, and the musicians later said they had no real sense of the final production. In part this was because Davis and his producer, Teo Macero, used the studio itself to process the sound and edit takes. But really it was because there had never been music like this before.

Bitches Brew was released in March 1970. The next month found Davis at San Francisco's Fillmore West, opening for the Grateful Dead; in June, he was at the Fillmore East in Manhattan. Both were recorded for live albums. In August, a year after the *Bitches Brew* sessions, Davis played in Tanglewood, alongside Santana.

Davis drove there in a Lamborghini and arrived late, annoying the famously volatile promoter, Bill Graham. "The concert was outdoors—there was a dirt road," Davis remembered. "I drove down that with all this dust flying everywhere. I pulled up in this cloud of dust and Bill was there waiting for me. When I got out I had on this full-length animal-skin coat. Bill's looking at me like he wants to get mad, right? So I say to him, 'What is it, Bill? You were waiting for somebody else to get out of that car?' And that just cracked him up."

Bitches Brew opened a door. In the studio and on the road, Davis would realize better versions of this sound—particularly on *Jack Johnson*, his 1971 tribute to the man who, in 1908, had become the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion. Davis pursued this sound relentlessly for five years, until his withdrawal from public life in 1975. It was music that seemed to have purpose but not structure, rhythm but not melody. Some misheard it as Davis trying to keep up. "I don't play rock, I play black," he said, and to some extent this music was the realization of the concept that came to him watching Les Ballets Africains years before. It had no clear beginnings or endings ("I never end songs," he said; "they just keep going on"), just endless rhythm vamps supporting horns, keyboardists, and guitarists, an epic extension of all the Afro-futurist ideals that Hendrix didn't live long enough to enact.

It was demanding of both the musicians and the audience, and the way it erased boundaries—between jazz and rock, the past and the future—took its toll. In 1975, Davis was burned out, his body ravaged by sickle cell anemia, operations to relieve resulting joint pain, and alcohol and drugs. He disappeared into his Upper West Side home, lost in a haze of cocaine, heroin, and Heineken.

When he returned, in 1981, his new album, *The Man with the Horn*, was preceded by a four-night stand in Boston. It was a celebration, and he announced his return by showing up each night in style. "I had bought a brand-new, canary-yellow 308 GTSi Ferrari sports coupe, with a targa top," he remembered. "The rest of the band had flown up to the gig, but I wanted everyone to see me arriving to work in my new Ferrari. I wanted them to know that I was really back, even if I was only staying right across the street from the club and could have just walked across the street every night. A little show biz don't hurt sometimes."

FIRST AND THIRD PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; SECOND PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT SIEGLER/INA VIA GETTY IMAGES

BY **LAWRENCE ULRICH**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MARIA SPANN**

THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN EAR

VOL. 15

LEGENDARY PRODUCER ELLIOT SCHEINER

IS ON A QUEST TO BRING THE METICULOUS DETAIL OF STUDIO RECORDINGS TO THE HYPERCOMPETITIVE CAR-AUDIO REALM.

I'M AT CLUBHOUSE, a time capsule of a studio in New York's Hudson Valley where artists from the National and the Lumineers to Linda Ronstadt have recorded music. My vintage-rock brain is duly blown: In one corner sits the Fender Rhodes electric piano that accompanied Elvis Presley's original Vegas run, "LV Hilton" stenciled on its surface. In another, a 1902 concert upright left here by songwriter Ben Folds.

It gets better. Fronting a prized 28-channel Neve console—the solid-state recording desk that defined Seventies rock, with a late encore for Nirvana's *Nevermind*—is Elliot Scheiner, the eight-time Grammy-winning producer, mixer, and engineer.

Perennially dissatisfied by the tin-can state of car audio, Scheiner lobbied initially skeptical automakers to raise their game. Scheiner tuned the industry's first factory DVD-Audio 5.1 surround-sound system, the Panasonic ELS unit in the 2004 Acura TL, equipped with a now-quaint eight speakers and 225 watts.

Scheiner, 75, has driven up from Connecticut this morning in his Aughts-era Ford Thunderbird as he prepares to record an album with jazz singer Madeleine Peyroux. An Acura MDX Type S Advance is parked outside, its 1000-watt, 25-speaker, 22-channel ELS Studio 3D Signature Edition system the latest beneficiary of Scheiner's golden ear.

It's an ear that leaned close to tweak Van Morrison's guitar sound on "Moondance." In fact, Scheiner has guided music from Fleetwood Mac, Aerosmith, the Eagles, Queen, Sting, Foo Fighters, and Beck. He helped birth notoriously meticulous Steely Dan albums—some requiring more than a year of Kubrickian takes with a revolving army of session musicians—which became the benchmark for a generation of studio engineers.

So when Scheiner bids me into his sweet spot at the Clubhouse desk to hear music as God, Bach, or the Beatles intended, he becomes an ideal guide for today's musical quest: how to re-create studio magic in your car as faithfully as possible. That's been Scheiner's personal earworm since the Eighties, including at Los Angeles's fabled A&M Studios.

"When we finished a mix, they could broadcast it from one room to a '57 Bel Air convertible," Scheiner recalls. "And you'd go in the car and just listen, basically to hear how bad it was. In all the cars, it just never sounded good enough."

Roll tape to 2005, when the Acura system tuned by Scheiner was more than good enough. After Scheiner engineered the Foo Fighters' *In Your Honor*, Dave Grohl and his bandmates heard and approved a final 5.1 mix not in the studio but inside the car. Finally, Scheiner and the artists whose vision he serves—plus the cars' owners who were singing along—could listen on systems that hit the right notes.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RHYME

Whistlin' Dixie aside, the first music heard in cars emanated from crudely repurposed home radios. In 1930, Paul Galvin stuffed a prototype AM radio into his Studebaker in time for a broadcasters' convention, branded it "Motorola," and became a millionaire. Blaupunkt brought the first FM car radio in 1952. CBS Laboratories' and Chrysler's Highway Hi-Fi records skipped into oblivion in 1959, despite clever tech that packed 45 minutes of music onto a seven-inch record. Eight-tracks, cassettes, and CDs have all given way to apps, streaming, and satellite radio, bringing variety at the price of (mostly) compressed audio files with sound quality worse than that of a CD.

Yet we're now arguably entering a golden age of car audio, driven by new tech and familiar luxury one-upmanship. Names once familiar only to audiophiles—Bang & Olufsen, Bowers & Wilkins, Burmester, Meridian, Naim, Mark Levinson, Lexicon, Infinity—are proliferating on our roads. Akin to a horsepower race, luxury cars can now pack more than 1000 watts and two dozen speakers, with nearly a separate amplifier channel for each.

Yet familiar challenges remain. From cramped quarters to hard and asymmetrical surfaces, car cabins are a sonic minefield. Occupants are jammed up against doors rather than seated at the idyllic center of the speakers' soundstage.

"Vehicles were always considered one of the worst audio environments," says Rishi Daftuar, who leads system design for Lexus's Mark Levinson systems as Harman International's senior principal acoustic systems engineer. That's been changing, Daftuar says, with top audio systems delivering sweeter playback than your average home setup. How many people have a dozen speakers in their living room, with equipment modeled, tuned, and optimized for their space and fixed listener positions? It's rather unlike most of us, who haphazardly prop a Bluetooth speaker behind a potted plant in our living room.

Audio systems must boost certain bass frequencies by about 10 dB to counteract road and engine noise. But they can also use cabin gain—the phenomenon wherein smaller spaces cause bass pressure to build quicker than larger spaces do—to amplify bass passively, for the chesty thump you usually experience only at concerts. Critical time delays ensure music from multiple speakers arrives at ears exactly when it's supposed to.

In Harman surveys, people cite their car as their most enjoyable and frequent listening environment. A Seventies teenager fishing under the

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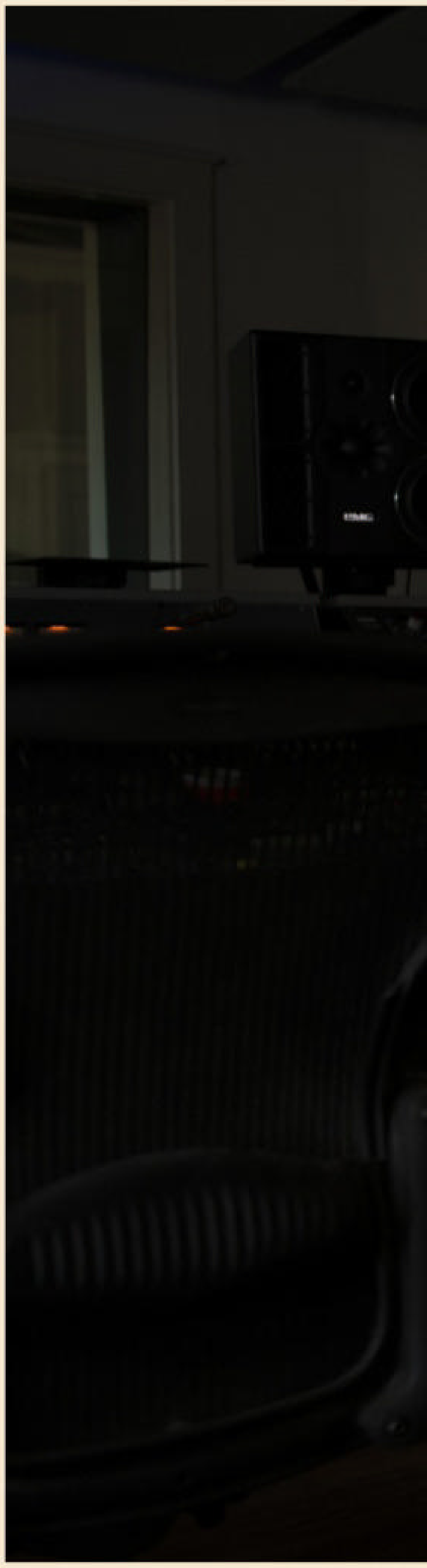

A. Eight-time Grammy-winning producer Elliot Scheiner has been creating high-end sound systems for Acura vehicles for almost 20 years.

seat for an *Exile on Main Street* tape might have said the same, but if that teenager heard the Stones' "Loving Cup" pour from the speakers of a modern luxury SUV, he'd start measuring space for a water bed.

"There's an emotional connection between driving and listening to music that transcends generations," says Jonathan Pierce, director of global experiential R&D at Harman Automotive.

As for today's digital tracks, which often stream from apps like Spotify or Pandora in mediocre quality—what Pierce calls "the bane of my existence"—many experts predict that the audio-quality problem will solve itself in our new big-bandwidth age. From Tidal's high-fidelity streaming to Spotify Premium at 320-kbps quality, Pierce sees lossless or CD-quality music as an inevitable advance for in-car listening.

SENSES WORKING OVERTIME

It's not all about the ears. The visual design of speakers was once largely automakers' domain, but audio companies are developing signature looks too. Automakers let audio partners advertise their brand names on shiny speaker grills.

"In any industrial design, the first interaction is with your eyes," Pierce says. "And if you're paying high dollar, visual aesthetics can be equally important." As long as there's no bait-and-switch in sound, he adds. "A system can look beautiful and ornate, but if sound quality falls flat, you're disappointed as a consumer."

Audio designers face a familiar hurdle in customers or suppliers who prefer pinching pennies to tapping toes. Mark Ziemba, Panasonic Automotive audio systems manager and Scheiner's tuning partner for about 20 years, puts it more symphonically. "You can do great things with digital tech, but you can't make a Stradivarius out of plywood," he says. "Core acoustic tech has suffered because they're commoditizing speakers, and that's sad."

What surrounds speakers is also critical to ultimate sound quality. Speaker grills should be as audibly transparent as possible to avoid muf-

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STUDER

signature edition

fling sound but still robust enough to offer protection from children's sticky fingers. The steel enclosures wherein most car speakers reside are a notorious hotbed of unwanted noise and motion.

"An amp can put out a signal and stop, but a speaker is like a vibrating spring," Ziemba says.

On several Acuras, Panasonic's Acoustic Motion Control sends a corrective signal to the amplifier to stop the speaker faster. Designers caution that speaker count alone isn't a be-all and end-all, but they're putting woofers, coaxials, and tweeters anywhere they can to create accurate, enveloping 3-D sound, including headliners, roof pillars, headrests, or center consoles.

To that end, better materials help. Ziemba cites the MDX Type S Advance's 1.7-inch carbon-graphite dome tweeters. Sure enough, they faithfully reproduce tricky frequencies that can be strident and ear-fatiguing on lesser systems—say, Bob Dylan's acoustic guitar and harmonica on 1962's "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down."

"Those frequencies can be torture for a tweeter," Ziemba says. "Now it sounds like Dylan is in the car with you; there's a sweetness to the sound that's unusual in a car."

In testing and validating onboard systems, six-microphone arrays are placed and angled at a listener's approximate head position, while laptops and sound cards generate pink-noise test frequencies. HATS, or head-and-torso simulators resembling crash test dummies, have microphones in their ears, as well as mouth speakers to fine-tune hands-free communications. For all of that, Ziemba says, a tiny adjustment in volume or equalization can improve playback in a way no objective tool can measure. "It still takes a human listening to make that final determination," he says.

In the Eighties, Ziemba and a partner created Listening Test Technology (LTT). Adopted by several OEMs, LTT taught hundreds of students how to listen to music and grade audio quality. In addition to its experts, Harman recruits laypeople to listen to and score seven set tracks, chosen in part for challenges they pose to systems, on various criteria. (Since times and listeners change, Harman recently replaced Steely Dan's "Cousin Dupree" with Daft Punk's "Fragments of Time," a different genre but a song with similar vibrancy and active rhythm sections.)

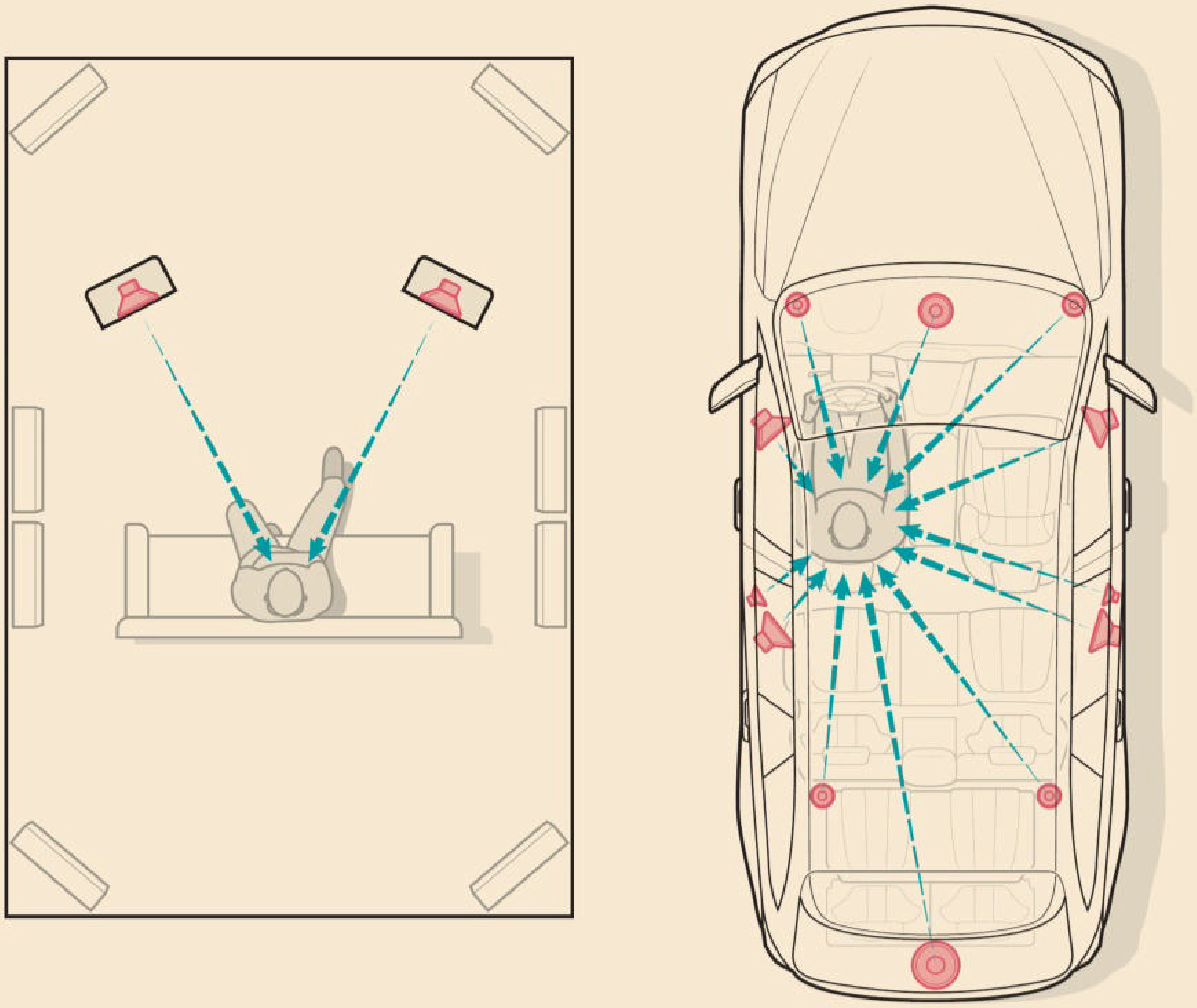
Naturally, Panasonic and Acura see Scheiner as their tuning trump card. Akin to Albert Biermann, the now-retired chassis guru who took BMW's M cars to ineffable heights, Scheiner melds his deep institutional knowledge to impeccable craftsmanship, then sprinkles on some black magic.

"It's not just a cut-and-dried academic thing," Ziemba says. He cites Scheiner's mixes of classic R.E.M. albums, the nuances he coaxed from Michael Stipe's heartfelt vocals. "Elliot knows not just where the instruments are supposed to be, what phrases were played, but the mood the musicians were in.

ELS SPEAKER PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM MEBANE

Small Venues

Compared with a simple two-speaker listening-room setup, cars present major audio challenges. Passengers are offset from the center of the soundstage, requiring programmed time delays to present a natural sound. Exterior noise (road and wind) is a constant problem. And interior sound tends to bounce off of reflective, asymmetrical surfaces, such as window glass, in undesirable ways. But compared with often-mediocre home Bluetooth speakers, modern car audio systems are like an audiophile's nirvana.



Whatever emotion the artist was feeling, he wants to bring that into the mix."

It wasn't always so, Scheiner is quick to add. He began his career as an assistant to legendary engineer and producer Phil Ramone in 1967.

"Back then, I based everything on *Sgt. Pepper's* and being high," Scheiner says with a twinkle. "But Phil taught me what I should be hearing."

HEARING IS BELIEVING

After listening to tracks in the sonic temple of Clubhouse, Scheiner, studio owner Paul Antonell, and I hop in the Acura for a drive. Scheiner rides shotgun as dream DJ, including running commentary and fly-on-the-wall rock stories. (Steely Dan's "Hey Nineteen," we learn, was inspired by Scheiner.)

The MDX Type S Advance's top-tier ELS unit would floor any music lover, especially with 5.1 mixes suffusing the cabin in six-channel bliss—not typical "surround sound" signal processing, with bogus "concert halls" and other artificially sweetened room effects. Among the clues to greatness in the MDX: Music sounds as pure and crystalline in the back seats as it does up front, partly due to center-console speakers and authentic three-way sound (woofer, coaxial, and tweeter) for all occupants. We can also hold a normal conversation, even with music cranking. It's a startlingly good system, particularly considering it's in an attainable daily-driver SUV and not some rolling Xanadu. (To see how the top-dollar systems compare, turn to "Road Noise," page 056.)

I pull up my own songs and artists, playing Sault, the shapeshifting R&B-funk-Afrobeat collective, and the ear-tickling siren Santigold. Then, in a hat tip to Scheiner, I cue up R.E.M.'s "The One I Love," Peter Buck's Rickenbacker 325 chiming that foreboding riff in stadium-rock splendor. It's a transformative upgrade from my mediocre home Sonos system. I'm starting to feel guilty about just hanging out. If we were teenagers, the cops would pull up any second. Antonell chimes in from the back, seemingly reading my thoughts.

"I can't remember the last time I just sat in a car listening to music," the studio owner says. "But I discovered music like this. It's how I became a fan."

Scheiner listens intently, calling attention to a bass attack here, a musical filigree there, the space between notes like a held breath.

"I always strived to make music where you can hear every detail if you focus," Scheiner says. "And that's the goal: to have everything sound exactly like it did in the studio."

A. VU meters are one way to measure audio levels, but Scheiner tends to trust his ears when recording artists or tuning audio systems.
B. This elaborate grill is part of the equally elaborate 25-speaker, 1000-watt ELS Studio Signature Edition audio system in the Acura MDX Type S.

BY **JOHN FLANSBURGH**

ROAD NOISE

STATE OF THE DRIVING-MUSIC ART.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **WILLIAM MEBANE**

Music and driving are a powerful combination. Whether it's a family singalong with this week's Taylor Swift chart crusher, zoning out on a left-of-the-dial DJ playing Nina Simone studio outtakes, or memorizing Jay-Z's rap from Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" because it's the CD that was left in the player, music makes the hours spent driving fly by.

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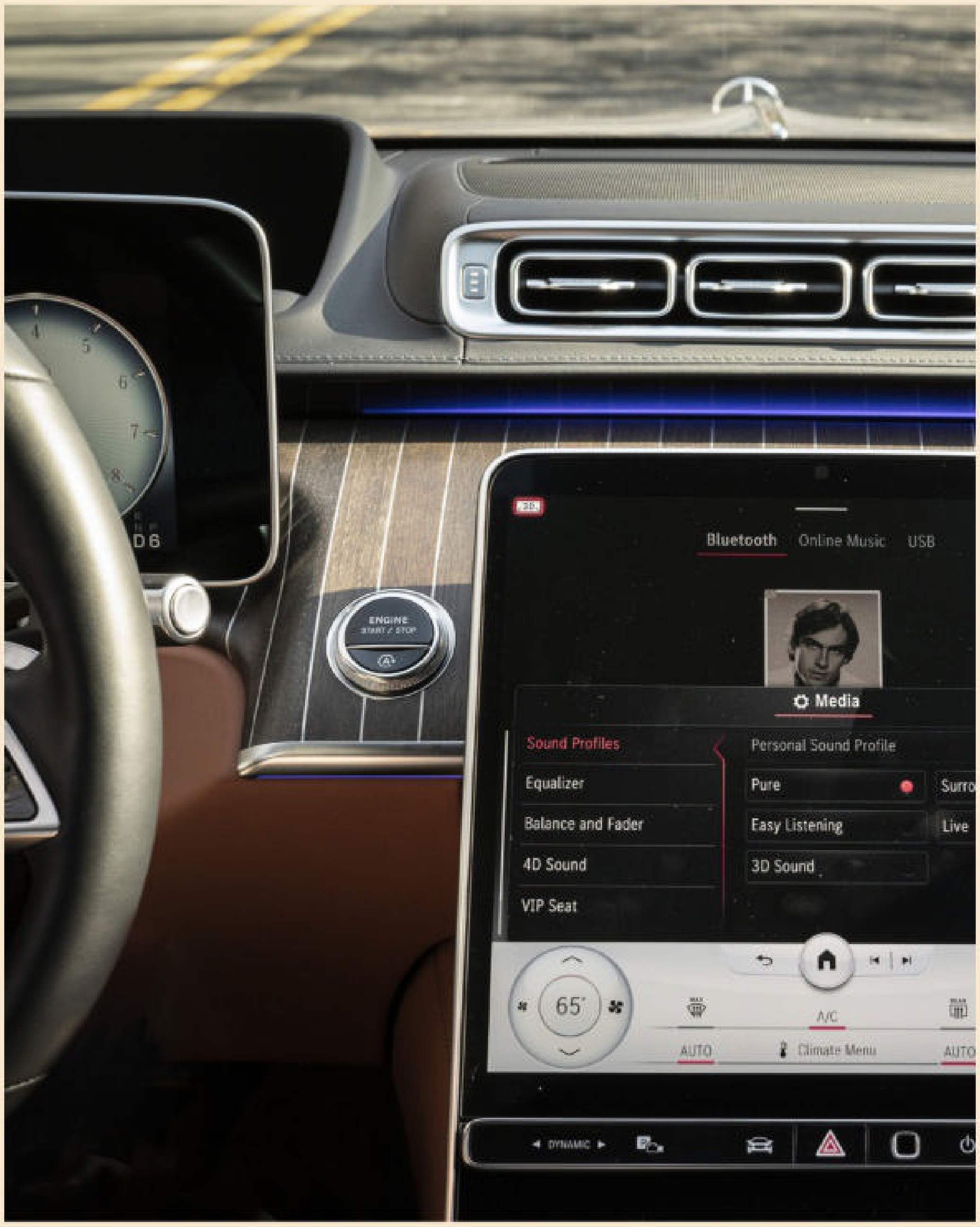


When it comes to listening to music in moving vehicles, I know of what I speak. As a young adult in the mid-Eighties, I made the lateral move from Walkman-addicted subway commuter to full-time long-distance hauler touring with They Might Be Giants. My musical partner John Linnell and I played as a duo in New York for a few years, but things got hectic when a few of our no-budget videos sneaked into heavy rotation alongside peak Whitney Houston and the inevitable Rick Astley on MTV. Our Ford Econoline crisscrossed the U.S. countless times from the mid-Eighties to the early Nineties, working the microcircuit of nightclubs friendly to the "college rock" sound. We spent a lot of time driving and listening, even though our entertainment options were confined to our slapdash mixtapes, trucker-song compilations, and, of course, the radio.

Fast-forward 35 years, and I'm still in the same band, now eight musicians strong. We are still making albums (even vinyl records!), and we're still crisscrossing America. Some things have changed, though. We now typically play theaters, and we travel in a big old tour bus, each of us wearing earbuds, cocooned from one another, listening to our own podcasts, audiobooks, and Spotify accounts.

So I am here to do some close listening and guide you through a highly subjective aural taste test of three audio-tuned new cars. These vehicles all price out well above my paygrade, so I was not shopping! But for the readers always curious about an honest shootout or for those who have the means to become the custodians of these singular whips, this is for you.

Audio engineers report that cars are among the worst places to achieve quality sound reproduction. It's not the size of the interior or the relatively small speakers, but, according to these hi-fi know-it-alls, it's the windows. Glass is about the most unkind material for sonic quality, reflecting rather than absorbing sound, so designers typically minimize its use in acoustic spaces. Yet despite these nagging truths, the popularity of windows in cars endures.

So let's get down to the testing. For our consideration, we have three luxury vehicles: a Mercedes-Maybach, a Range Rover, and a Rolls-Royce. All have extraordinary appointments and the smoothest of rides with the quietest of engines. It's in this rarefied segment of the vehicle market that the battle for audio supremacy is fiercest, with manufacturers stuffing their cars with dozens of speakers, bewildering digital-

A. Mercedes takes an easy win in the Elaborately Decorated Branded Speaker Grates category.
B. All testing was done with the systems in neutral EQ settings.
C. The Meridian system in the Range Rover is notably more understated than the others but still sounds great.
D. The Rover's interface is simpler than the Maybach's.

manipulation programming, and the most elite audio brand names available. One could assume the cars' manufacturers are not cutting corners in their quest to achieve stellar audio for their customers. But did they deliver?

In comparing these systems, my goal was to be consistent and systematic. I used a fixed playlist to audition in each car and set all the systems to neutral EQ, which is to say, no treble or bass boosting, as best I could control. I listened to all songs while on the road. The test audio files were downloaded from Spotify in the highest-quality setting. Not exactly FLAC-format lossless files, but quite respectable sounds. I connected my iPhone to each vehicle via Bluetooth.

First up was the 2022 Mercedes-Maybach S580. This bedazzled sedan comes standard with the Burmester High-End 4D Surround Sound system, and well it should since the car's base price nears $200,000. The system is a $6730 option on the less opulent non-Maybach S-class. The Burmester sports a whopping 30 speakers, including five subwoofers, two amplifiers, and a total of 1750 watts of power. Like virtually all of today's high-end systems, the Burmester's interface is incorporated into a centrally mounted touchscreen. Trying to set up the Bluetooth, I fumbled with the screen, cascading from the hieroglyphs of a graphical interface to proper words for a couple of minutes. After getting completely lost and momentarily blasting the Sirius MSNBC channel at about one billion decibels, shocking everyone's ears, *Road & Track* contributing editor (and They Might Be Giants longtime manager and my driver for this experiment) Jamie Kitman took command of the controls and zeroed in on the task at hand. To my shame, he got things sorted in seconds.

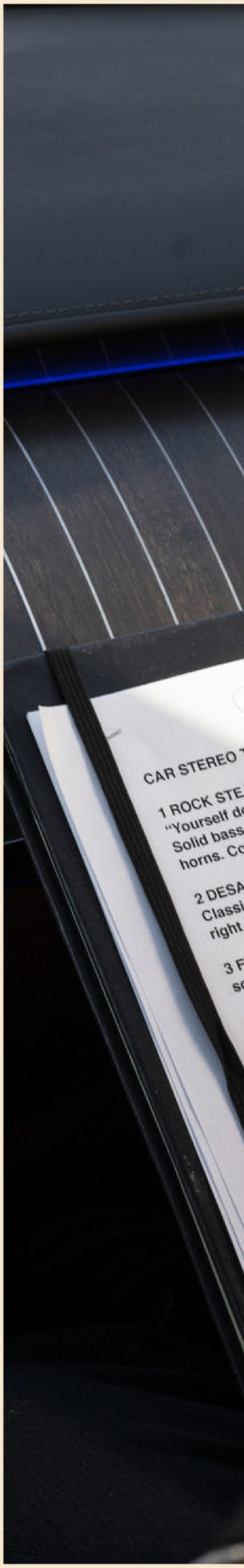
Once the system was on, the music was immediately pumping, but it also had an exaggerated, out-of-phase quality reminiscent of an Eighties boombox. I knew something was not neutral about this setup and poked around to find a series of "Personal Sound Profile" presets. The system was set to 3D-Sound, but there was also an option for Pure, which, as the name implies, sounded far more natural.

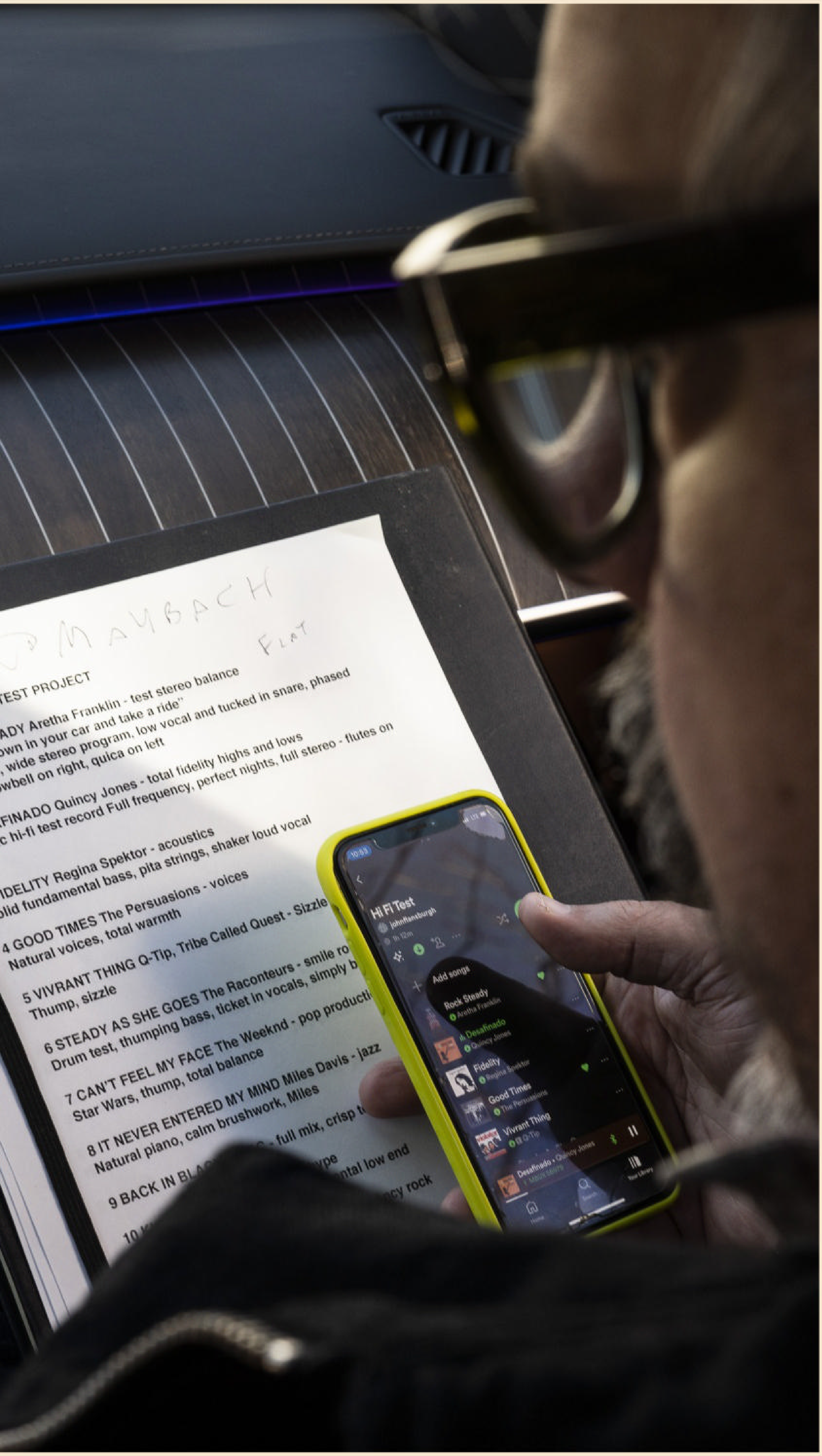
My first test track in every car was "Rock Steady" by Aretha Franklin, a robust slice of Seventies R&B created just as multitrack recording was coming into its own. Like her vibiest tracks, Aretha is at the piano, New Orleans legend Dr. John and funk guitar maestro Robert Popwell are credited for percussion, and the inimitable Bernard Purdie is on the drums. Purdie is one of the most recorded drummers of all time, famous to many for the albums he made with Steely Dan, which remain go-to test records for many audiophiles. As Aretha sang, "Sit yourself down in your car and take a ride," the music came up strong and thumpin', with every kick-drum beat accom-

C, D

MERIDIAN
3D SURROUND

IPHONE (2)
WITH THE MILES DAVIS QUINTET
11:22
Miles Davis Quintet
Workin'
It Never Entered My Mind
70
MAX A/C




MAYBACH
FLAT
TEST PROJECT
ADY Aretha Franklin - test stereo balance
own in your car and take a ride"
, wide stereo program, low vocal and tucked in snare, phased
wbell on right, quica on left
FINADO Quincy Jones - total fidelity highs and lows
c hi-fi test record Full frequency, perfect nights, full stereo - flutes on
IDELITY Regina Spektor - acoustics
olid fundamental bass, pita strings, shaker loud vocal
4 GOOD TIMES The Persuasions - voices
Natural voices, total warmth
5 VIVRANT THING Q-Tip, Tribe Called Quest - Sizzle
Thump, sizzle
6 STEADY AS SHE GOES The Raconteurs - smile ro
Drum test, thumping bass, ticket in vocals, simply b
7 CAN'T FEEL MY FACE The Weeknd - pop productio
Star Wars, thump, total balance
8 IT NEVER ENTERED MY MIND Miles Davis - jazz
Natural piano, calm brushwork, Miles
9 BACK IN BLA
Hi Fi Test
johnflansburgh
Add songs
Rock Steady
Aretha Franklin
Desafinado
Quincy Jones
Fidelity
Regina Spektor
Good Times
The Persuasions
Vivrant Thing
Q-Tip
Desafinado • Quincy Jones
Home
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panied by a physical bump coming from inside our seats. The sound was in true stereo—cowbell to my right, cuíca drum to my left.

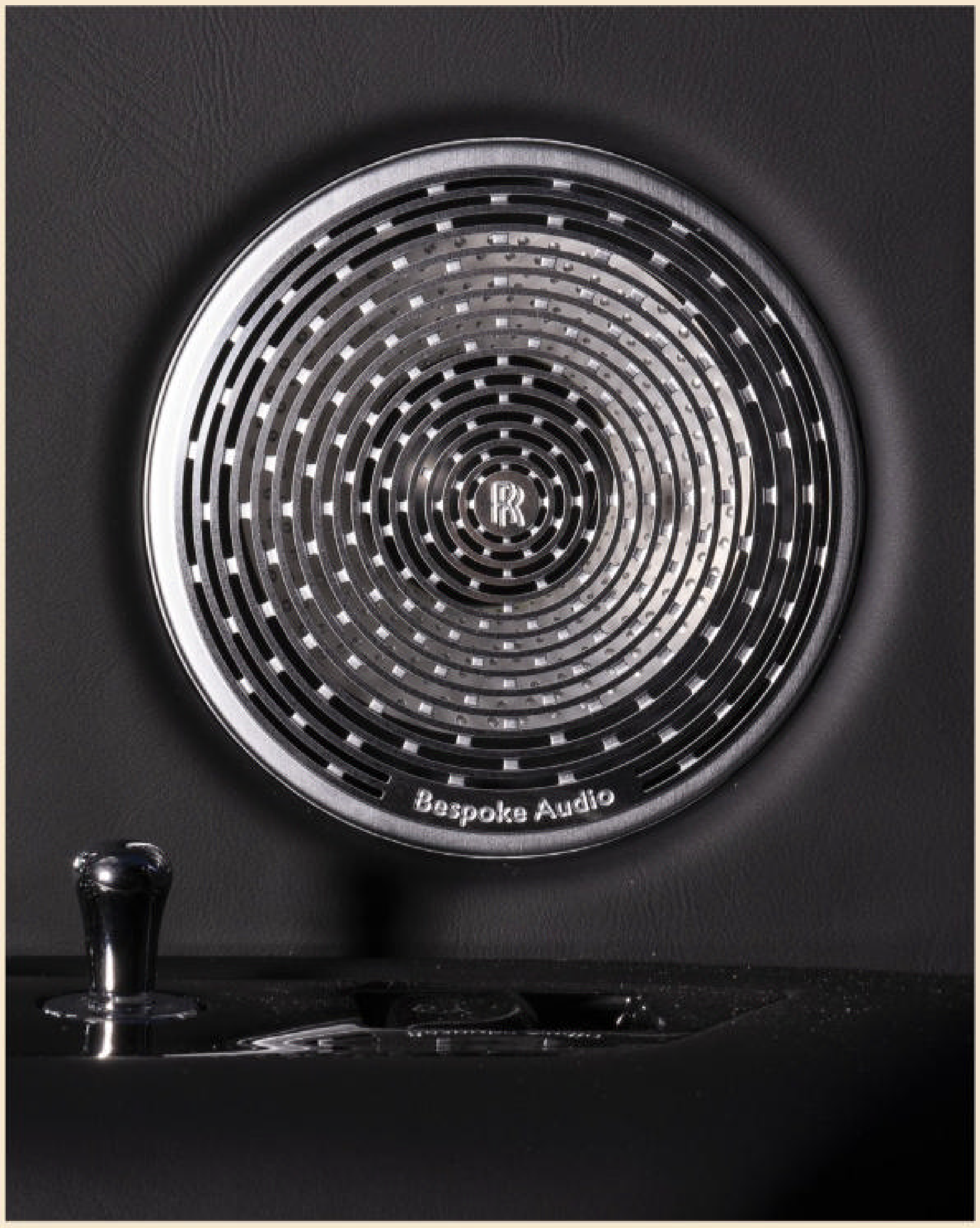
Allow me a brief rant here. For many years, a fundamental flaw with car stereos has been that they aren't stereo at all but a diminished mono-fide blend of the two channels. As a teenager, my best guess was this was so die-hard Beatlemaniacs wouldn't drive off the road straining to hear the vocal-only channel coming from the speaker mounted to the passenger's-side door, but I have come to understand it is just a compromise to ensure everyone in the cabin experiences the same thing. Still, real stereo sound can be achieved, and this car can do it.

The Mercedes-Maybach continued to score high on all sorts of songs—Regina Spektor's "Fidelity" was warm, while the subtle shaker remained distinct. The booming and crispy loops of "Vivrant Thing" by Q-Tip were authoritative, and the full-tilt guitar-grind test track "Fill in the Blank" by the great alternative band Car Seat Headrest was equally definitive. This car clearly demonstrates what a top-tier modern luxury vehicle gets you in the way of audio.

There was one unexpected experience with the Mercedes-Maybach system, but it occurred after the testing was over. As Kitman moved the car to a safe spot in the lot, he flipped back to MSNBC to hear the latest news and discovered the voices of the broadcasters were also thumpin', with low end emitted from the seats. Many people like extreme bass, but I suspect no one is looking for it in their news reports.

Next up was the 2023 Range Rover P400 SE, which carries a $105,975 base price and comes with a 15-speaker Meridian sound system. But why settle? Better to throw in an additional $1200 for the more powerful 19-speaker Meridian 3D Surround Sound version, as on this test vehicle. The Rover's touchscreen is more straightforward than the Maybach's, and moments after the Bluetooth from my iPhone paired, we were on the road. The sound was magnificent. Again, to my delight, it was rendered in full stereo. Quincy Jones's "Desafinado," a sparkling example of both the early-Sixties pop–Bossa Nova fad and the stereo test-record fad, presented great stereo imaging—with flutes discretely on the right channel where they should be. The frequency response was generally good, rivaling the Maybach sans thump. While we all try to repress our inner–soccer hooligan, the power in the sonics of "Back in Black" by AC/DC is hard to argue with: clear and bold, with plenty of punch from the bass and guitars, along with crisp highs from the cymbals. Unfortunately, even cranked to maximum volume, the song was a bit less defined in the Range Rover than in the Maybach, and the track lacked some of its head-butting mojo.

B



C

Bluetooth®: Spotify
Can't Feel My Face
OFF
SOFT
MED
HIGH
MAX

A. Here comes science! Flansburgh takes an admirably systematic approach to this entirely subjective comparison test.

B. This audio system is so good that we don't even recoil at the use of the word "bespoke."

C. Rolls-Royce likes to hide its technology behind old-world trappings, and, you know, it works.

Our final test drive was truly remarkable, not just because of the sound but because of the car itself. I still don't quite know how to process my encounter with the 2022 Rolls-Royce Cullinan Black Badge. Aptly named Bespoke Audio, a small high-end company out of Hastings, England, supplied the sound system that specs out at 600 watts thumping across 16 speakers.

But before the sound, let's talk about the car—as formidable a vehicle as the name Rolls-Royce implies. Oversized in almost every way, it makes the American-built luxury SUVs I've experienced seem like minivans. The depth of color of the vehicle's exterior is mesmerizing. The Cullinan was so imposing, so flawless, so precious that every curb we could potentially scrape seemed like a threat, and since the Rolls's size fully occupied the single lane we were driving in, every oncoming car was the enemy. I know this vehicle is meant to be driven by the owner, but in a sense, the driver becomes the car's chauffeur. The only feature that was lacking for me was a cloak of invisibility. Maybe the car was telling us we weren't worthy.

The Bluetooth pairing? Instantaneous. The sound was balanced but also vivid. The piano on Miles Davis's "It Never Entered My Mind" was finally full, with warm upper-mids. And the gentle spank of James Taylor's "Your Smiling Face" was so perfectly L.A. Seventies rock I thought somebody turned on the air conditioner. The Bespoke system was a standout and the clear winner. So what if it's a $10,800 upcharge on a vehicle that carries a base price only one bottle of Dom away from $400,000?

All of these systems speak to the nature of car sound systems in general. Like televisions in the showroom, car stereos are preset to sweeten whatever audio they are playing. I purposely included the classic song "Kick Out the Jams" by the MC5 on the playlist to test this idea. The track is undeniably harsh on headphones or studio reference monitors. I wanted to see how this kind of recording would show up on these high-end car systems. As I suspected, this raucous rocker felt smoothed over. Coloration was ubiquitous in these most-modern systems. Some would argue it's the smooth vibes folks are paying for, but it is also hard not to notice how often terms like "clarity" and "accuracy" are used in pitching car audio.

So these cars all have thoroughly modern, great to phenomenal systems, with surprising warmth, full frequency response, and true stereo imaging (at last!). In summary: Turn it up!

Here Comes Your
★ VAN ★

Life On The Road, Or How
BLACK
FRANCIS
Learned to LOVE an '86
CADILLAC
FLEETWOOD.

BY JAMIE KITMAN ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW BOYLE

A

★ W ★

WORKING ROCK MUSICIANS had better like the road. For guitar slingers or drummers, an unwillingness to tour is close to deploying a dragster's anti-accelerative parachute on one's career. Want to rock for a living? Get used to planes, trains, and automobiles. Plus ferries, buses, vans, and trucks, with the occasional golf cart thrown in for navigating festivals. If you're lucky enough to be invited to them, that is.

I know these touring truths firsthand, having spent over 30 years managing bands. For me, the constant travel worked out nicely, rounding out an already peripatetic career writing for car magazines, with their ever-present requirement that you go somewhere, anywhere, by car. Not all of my musical charges enjoyed touring as much as I did or as much as they perhaps should have. But early on I made one friend whose enthusiasm for the road set an example I wish all acts aspired to.

Meet Charles Michael Kittridge Thompson IV, better known by his nom de rock, Black Francis, and sometimes Frank Black. He and guitarist Joey Santiago, whom he met at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, from which they both prematurely dematriculated, headed to Boston in 1986. There the youthful duo met bassist Kim Deal and drummer David Lovering. They formed a formidable rock unit called Pixies or the Pixies. No one knows which.

Whatever the name, calling them compelling is a gross understatement. This indie outfit changed the face and sound of so-called modern or alternative rock and, ultimately, that of mainstream rock. David Bowie hailed them as ingenious, and Radiohead's Thom Yorke said they changed his life. Kurt Cobain credited Thompson and the Pixies with inspiring his band, the legendary Nirvana, and specifically their best-selling LP, *Nevermind*. "I was trying to write the ultimate pop song. I was basically trying to rip off the Pixies. I have to admit it," Cobain told *Rolling Stone*. "When I heard the Pixies for the first time, I connected with that band so heavily that I should have been in that band—or at least a Pixies cover band. We used their sense of dynamics, being soft and quiet and then loud and hard."

With punk and surf-rock elements, the Pixies' sound coalesced on their second album, 1989's *Doolittle*. Noisy and dissonant yet supremely melodic, it was a solid foundation for the Nineties' mega-oeuvre, grunge. Bowie dubbed the band "the psychotic Beatles."

Charles Thompson is not an automotive enthusiast. But he loves to drive, and he loves the road. And the car he's loved the most is a yellow 1986 Cadillac Fleetwood with a padded vinyl roof, bought 33 years ago with his first royalty check and which he still owns. It's an old warhorse he's driven all over the country countless times, even though on the early fall day I arrive for a visit, it's not running. It's resting in the grass under a big tree, dusted in pine needles, next to the driveway of his Massachusetts home. It's near a late-model Mitsubishi Outlander bought used from Enterprise to provide the reliable, all-weather transport this committed family man needs, along with a Sprinter van for hauling the bulky accouterments of rock. The Caddy, in Craigslist-ese, "needs restoration."

I first met Thompson in March 1987, on the first day I officially managed the band They Might Be Giants. The bands were opening for two bigger acts, Big Bang Theory and Fishbone, in New York City's East Village at a club called the Ritz. I arrived late and parked the German-market 1969 Rover 2000TC I'd just bought and driven almost 900 miles—with nine breakdowns over 60 hours—straight from Milledgeville, Georgia.

Thompson was a refreshingly unassuming fellow with a band from Boston that had a big sound. But I didn't really get to know him until 1993, when the Pixies split up and he released a

B

A. (Previous page) Black Francis, no stranger to the road. You may have heard of his band, the Pixies.

B. Where is his mind? Don't ask again. (But probably planning some road trip.)

storming solo album as Frank Black. I spent an enjoyable day cruising around Los Angeles with him and his then girlfriend, Jean Walsh, in a Rolls-Royce Silver Spur for England's *Car* magazine. England loved the Pixies, and a song title on the band's 1991 album, *Trompe le Monde,* reflects the significant amount of time they spent there, on the charts and on the road. Believed to concern a UFO crash survivor and the New Mexican town of space oddities, "Motorway to Roswell" employs the Briticism for what we in the United States call a highway.

Thompson is no ersatz Brit. There's no adult-onset English accent, à la Madonna. Indeed, it was while rolling around in the Roller that I learned of Thompson's obsession with his all-American Cadillac. He recounts its purchase in 1989 like it was only yesterday.

"I had gone from basically running away from creditors to 'Oh, I got a check for 16 grand here.' And, so, I was like, 'I'm going to buy a car. Pay cash for it.' So, my father's like, 'Chuck, get a fucking Cadillac.' He said, 'Just get that.' So we go down to the Cadillac dealership on the Cape [Cod, where his pater once owned a bar], and I find a 1986 Cadillac, still relatively new, $13,000. It'd been bought by some little old lady—a big, giant, yellow Cadillac. To me, it was a car. I didn't care. And it got a lot of oohs and aahs from people, even back then. And so that became my car, and it was my main car, as you know, for many, many years."

Thompson had spent extended blocks of time in L.A. as a youth, and for a time in 1990, he moved back to escape the Northeastern cold. That cross-country Caddy drive with Walsh was memorialized by music writer (and authorized Nirvana biographer) Michael Azerrad: "After the lengthy *Doolittle* tour, Santiago and Lovering took vacations; Deal found an outlet for her singing and songwriting by forming an all-female band called the Breeders, which recorded an excellent album, *Pod*; Thompson bought a canary-yellow Cadillac and drove across the country with his girlfriend, playing occasional solo gigs for gas money. Rather than doing sensitive acoustic readings of his songs, he'd simply plug in an electric guitar and flail and scream as if the three other Pixies were backing him up."

The car has enduring appeal for Thompson. "It was a less expensive way for me to have my own space and freedom on the road without having to get my own tour bus, which is crazy expensive, of course. And some of it falls under the category of playing whatever sort of logistical game that you play with rental-car companies. Say you went to Enterprise or National, and they ask, 'You want an economy car, you want a mid-size, a full-size, a luxury car?'

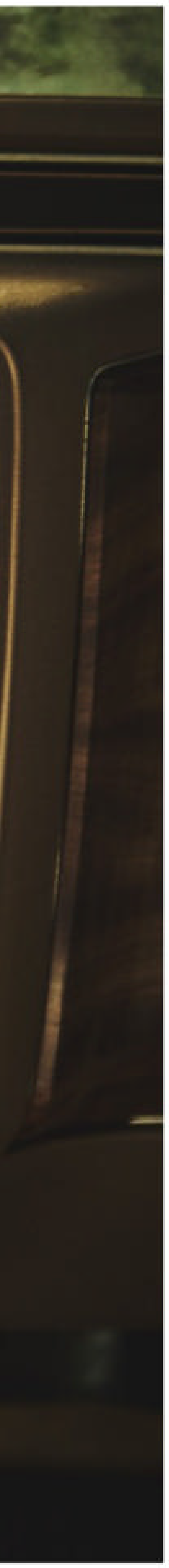
“This is before they were offering a lot of SUVs. But at their superior or luxury level, whatever they called it, a lot of the rental-car companies had Lincolns, including the Town Car. And those cars, I thought, were comfortable. They were easy on the eyes when you were driving long drives. They always came in gray or silver, these slightly muted kinds of tones. And they had a giant V-8 engine, of course, plus a massive trunk. Four big dudes, no problem, as long as you don’t have a lot of shit in the car. And perfect for when you have a long-ass drive ahead of you.”

I’d long thought bands aspired to tour in vans and buses, but here was Thompson rocking an American luxury car. So did that critically regarded band of veteran road warriors, NRBQ, whom They Might Be Giants played with a few times, pulling away from an outdoor festival in the Pacific Northwest one day in two identical blue early-Nineties front-drive Fleetwoods. It wasn’t long before the Giants got a brand-new black Crown Victoria, affectionately known as the “Crown Vince,” to serve as their mobile privacy dome.

“It’s just a game that everybody that goes on tour plays,” Thompson says. “Some people do it better than others, but you just try to make it so you don’t crowd into other people’s personal space, and they don’t crowd into yours, and everyone’s happy. And they’re all there to do the work and get the work done.”

Getting to gigs hundreds of wide-open miles apart presented an additional challenge—the law. “Once, in my speedy sedan with a V-8, I got three

A. An anachronistic head unit: necessary on any old car you actually want to use.
B. Cars and guitars. What is it with these things that pulls us in so close?
C. Thompson swears he’s not sentimental. He just keeps cool old things around.



A

B

Mon Oncle
UN FILM DE
JACQUES TATI

C

tickets in one day from three states. In those days, they would write a paper ticket and hand you a copy. I may have been a flighty, boho kid, but I knew that it was good if I paid the ticket. I'd go to the town clerk and pay right away, no problem.

"But then, sometime in the Nineties, they connected everything with the matrix, and all your tickets would show up on your record. 'We see, in the last three months, you had four speeding violations.' So I did this Ramones tour, and I got four or five points on my license. And the DMV said, 'We have to revoke your license for six months.' Not that great. I lived in L.A. I'd take the bus and the RTD sometimes, but mostly I drove around like everybody else. [A revoked license] was a style cramper. But someone told me you could ask for your license back sooner. So, I called them. A judge got on the telephone, and after we spoke for a while, he had me raise my right hand and give an oath over the phone that I would be a good driver. And he said, 'You don't have any speeding violations before this. So, this is a new thing for you.' I was like, 'Yeah, absolutely. I'm very sorry. I don't know what got into me.'"

THOMPSON RECOUNTS ADVENTURES with his first car, a rusted-out $500 Plymouth Duster bought for him and his brother in high school. After rainstorms, cold water would spill through the decayed sunroof at stop signs. Memories of a novice off-roader's adventures in an O.J.-style Bronco he bought new in the early Nineties terrify him. The master raconteur segues into his recent fascination with the Citroën SM he saw in a French car museum. He concludes that he wouldn't be an SM's ideal keeper. Then his eyes light up when discussing his lifelong infatuation with roads.

"When I was a kid, my father, he'd give me this pie in the sky sometimes—but it was fun to talk about. 'Someday, son, you and I will take a road trip. We will take Route 1 down the Pacific Coast Highway, but we'll go to Mexico. We'll keep on going. It goes all the way through Central America. It goes all the way down to Tierra del Fuego in Chile. We take it all the way. We'll go the whole way down.'

"So, more than anything, I'm interested in road systems. And I have my favorite ones that I like to drive on. The French péage, the autoroute toll-road system first proposed by [Charles] de Gaulle as a way to get the French economy going after the Second World War. It goes most everywhere in the country, about 14,000 kilometers. But it's a closed system. You're either in or you're out. That fascinates me," he explains. Relatedly, he reveals he's working on a screenplay with a French filmmaker, Louis Collins, about a faded rock star intent on driving every mile of the péage. So, I

Fleetwood
A

A. "Even the roads I don't like can be fun to drive on," he says.

ask, is this going to be what? A dramatic film, an art film, a comedy, a buddy movie? "All of the above," he replies before continuing his meditation on highways and byways.

"Even the roads I don't like can be fun to drive on. For example, driving in inclement weather. I enjoy that. I remember my friend Dave Philips—he just passed away a couple of years ago, but we did a lot of duo shows—and long drives with him in big cars, including my Cadillac. We would be just like, 'Let's drive in the blizzard. There are all-night diners. It's just us and a few brave trucks, and it'll take us eight hours to get there. But look at this weather, man. It's so amazing. Look at the wind. Look at the snow.' I probably took a lot more chances when I was younger, like a lot of people. But I enjoy complicated driving."

Talk returns to the yellow Cadillac, whose restoration Thompson underwrote once years back. "When I give it love, it does fine. But because of the pandemic and a couple other things, it's sat for a few years, and now it's fallen the furthest from grace it has ever been." So what will he do?

"I tell myself that I'm not sentimental over objects, but I've had this object in my life for so long. And I like the idea of keeping an older thing, especially an older car, keeping it going because it's not designed to just die and be thrown away."

As he's grown older, driving all night appeals less, but Thompson still likes big cars. "You want to be able to throw trash over your shoulder. You know what I mean?"

Which may be why Thompson has an ongoing obsession with a plan to take the opportunity of the Cadillac's possible upcoming restoration to widen it. "Right now, it's just gathering moss in my driveway. I was going to fix it up for one of my kids. But right now, that order is very tall, and I haven't found the right guy yet to do all the work.

"When I was in junior high, there was a kid that I used to hang out with once in a while. His father was a construction worker, and he loved the music of the Sixties and Seventies. He loved the Eagles. He loved Janis Joplin. Some of the music I didn't mind. He'd take us on camping trips once in a while. And during the week, he worked out in the desert at whatever construction site he was on. He lived in his van, a Seventies Dodge. He had puka shells and a permanent hairdo, a real Mr. California. He was out of a Tarantino movie, a really sweet guy.

"But what he did with the van was interesting, and it used to draw attention anytime it drove down the street. People would stop and point, 'Mom, look. Look. Look at the van.' He split the whole fucking thing down the middle vertically, and he popped it out as wide as it could go, maybe an extra four inches. How cool would this Cadillac be if it was really wide?"

VIGNETTES
FROM THE
LONG &
PASSIONATE
LOVE

LOVE AFFAIR OF ICONS & THEIR CARS

FEATURING

EAST COAST RAPPERS *and the* **MAZDA MINIVANS**
CHARLIE WATTS *and his* **LAGONDA RAPIDE**
BOB MARLEY *and various* **BMWS**
NEIL YOUNG *and a* **HEARSE NAMED MORT**
DAVID CROSBY *and* **MILES DAVIS'S FERRARI 275 GTB/4**

I WANT MY MPV

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE but undeniable. In the video for Fat Joe's 1993 banger "The Shit Is Real," the Bronx-born rapper, boasting of his successful transition from a life of crime to a life of stardom, emerges onto a New York City street in his ride of choice. It is not a Mercedes, a Cadillac, or a Lexus. It's not even an Acura. It's a first-generation Mazda MPV, a snouty three-doored loaf, with which the economy brand entered the American minivan market in 1988 for the 1989 model year.

Joe wasn't alone in his affection for this odd-duck truck. The MPV appeared in the lyrics and videos for a raft of Nineties East Coast hip-hop legends, including Biz Markie, the Wu-Tang Clan, Prodigy, Busta Rhymes, Heavy D, and the Notorious B.I.G.

It wasn't the MPV's available V-6 and four-wheel drive or its exalted position on *Car and Driver*'s 1990 and 1991 10Best lists that appealed to these superstars. Like many fashions that rose from the streets—including Kangol caps and Timberland boots—the vehicular trend was based at least in part on it being so uncool that any modish gloss could be placed upon it. Its stealthy mom-core drag, ability to seat seven members of "a sick-ass clique," and ample capacity for carrying many "keys from 'cross seas," as praised by Wu-Tang's Raekwon, surely also compelled these poets.

But according to the late Biz Markie, the roots of MPV affection emerged from a cult of personality. Though Gang Starr member DJ Premier claimed that his personalized MPV, with its highly regarded custom sound system, was the progenitor of rappers' affinity for the vehicle, Markie—in a 2017 interview with Questlove—traces it to notorious Harlem crack dealer Rich Porter.

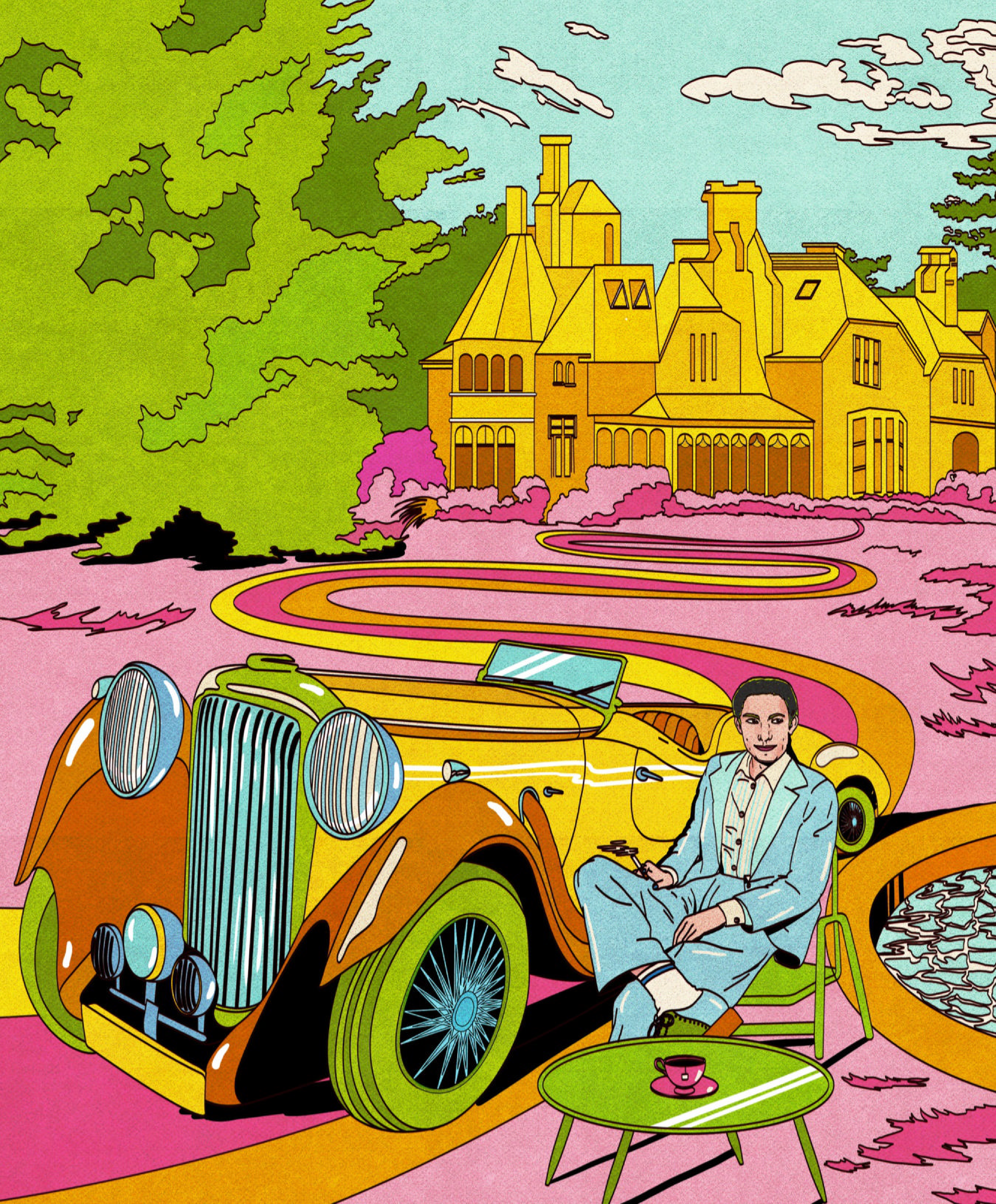
Porter, whose life was the inspiration for the 2002 movie *Paid in Full*, was an avid car collector and automotive omnivore. Of course, he bought Benzes and BMWs, but he had a Mazda RX-7 and a Nissan 300ZX too. Markie knew Porter from the neighborhood and saw him around. One time in the late Eighties, he ran into Porter, whom he described as "one of the flyest dudes known to man." Porter was driving a weird-looking van.

"I said, 'Yo man, what is that?'" Markie related. Porter told him it was a Mazda MPV. Flush with cash from his hit single, "Just a Friend," Markie said he went car shopping the next day and bought two. He gave a blue one to his DJ, Cool V, and kept a black one for himself. He customized it with black chrome BBS rims and a $12,000 sound system that included a digital audio tape (DAT) player, a music-reproduction technology so faithful that the recording industry attempted to have it banned for fear of widespread piracy.

By the early Nineties, the Mazda van trend had become so viral it even united beefing East and West Coast rappers. When California superstar Tupac Shakur was in New York filming the 1994 basketball drama *Above the Rim*, he was spotted rolling through Harlem. He was in an MPV.

BY **BRETT BERK** • ILLUSTRATION BY **NATALIE FOSS**

TS



DRIVING MR. WATTS

IMAGINE A DAY not that long ago, on an exclusive, 600-acre, 16th-century countryside estate near a small village in the English county of Devon. Winding peastone-gravel roads lead past pendunculate and Spanish oak and walls with rose arches, pines and parterres, rhododendrons and flowering shrubs to Halsdon Manor, the main house. There are a variety of outbuildings, including a stud barn for Arabian horses.

Then imagine stately Charlie Watts, the taciturn drummer for the Rolling Stones—a band that, over its six-decade touring life, has played to millions of fans and, on the '75 tour, brought a giant inflatable penis nicknamed Tired Grandfather out onto the stage—emerging from the front door of the manor house wearing a bespoke suit stitched by H. Huntsman & Sons, as well as custom, hand-cobbled George Cleverley shoes.

It is just after lunch. An estate worker in charge of Charlie's car collection has opened the carriage-house doors, fired up all 12 cylinders of the 1937 Lagonda Rapide convertible (one of 25 built), driven it along the gravel track to the manor door, and parked it there, engine running.

The Lagonda is a masterwork of W.O. Bentley, whose company had gone bust a few years earlier. His work at Lagonda produced a striking drophead that is both elegant and aggressive (one of them won the 1935 Le Mans). It is somehow a perfect match for the drummer.

Watts, snow-white hair swept back, steps into the running car and settles into the driver's seat.

And there he sits, upright as if at a drum kit, though the stadium stage and blues rock couldn't be further from his mind. He is listening to another kind of music altogether: The purr of the 4.5-liter V-12 plays like jazz in his ears, and an intoxicating vibration from the 60-degree separated cylinder banks passes through the seat up into the four-spoke steering wheel to his palms.

Watts had suits made to match each of his cars. He smooths his lapel and watches the Arabians circle the nearby training paddock. Some time passes, maybe an hour. Then Watts steps out of the car and walks back inside. The estate man drives the car back to the carriage house. The show is over. There is no encore. Watts got what he wanted and what he needed.

As a drummer, Watts was known for his effortlessness and his economy—he never played too much, seeming to revel in the poetry of restraint. Watts's playing, like Watts himself, called little attention to itself. The only reason the jazz drummer joined the Stones in '63, according to Keith Richards (who revered Watts), was for the money. Richards wrote, "We cut down on our rations, we wanted him so bad, man."

Watts's relationship with cars was so economical he never actually drove one. He was seemingly born an old man, a jazz aficionado, and a car enthusiast. "I don't particularly want to drive," he told a school newspaper when he was a student at the Harrow School of Art in 1960. "But if I were a millionaire, I'd buy vintage cars just to look at them because they're beautiful."

Funny how that worked out. Watts had a net worth of around $250 million when he died in 2021 and had collected, it's assumed, dozens of cars worthy of his epicurean tastes, including a yellow Lamborghini Miura and, rumor has it, a Bugatti Type 57 Atlantic. His will, released in probate court after his death, contains an entire sheet itemizing his cars and to whom he bequeathed them; it's the only redacted page.

BY **MIKE GUY** • ILLUSTRATION BY **MARIA CONTRERAS**

B IS FOR BOB

IN THE SEVENTIES, in the scruffy Trenchtown neighborhood of Jamaica's capital, Kingston, you wouldn't see a lot of finely engineered German cars on the street. So denizens took notice of the red BMW 1602 parked there. That car belonged to the most famous Jamaican singer-songwriter ever born—Bob Marley. Even in this notoriously crime-ridden ghetto, he kept the doors unlocked because he knew no one in Trenchtown would touch his ride. Marley was no gearhead and had little passion for anything costly except his guitars (he played Gibson Les Pauls, Fender Stratocasters, and an occasional Washburn or Yamaha). For Marley, the car was all about the name.

"I have a BMW," he famously said. "But only because it stands for Bob Marley and the Wailers, and not because I need an expensive car."

B for Bob. M for Marley. W for Wailers.

For a guy who grew up in abject poverty, simple transportation was a luxury. In "No Woman, No Cry," he sang of those early days when he was strapped for cash: "My feet is my only carriage, and so I've got to push on through." Marley's first single, from 1962, was called "One Cup of Coffee." By 1973, his music was catching on in the States. "It's Here—Reggae Rock," the *New York Times* announced that year, in the earliest mention of Marley we could locate in mainstream American print. By the mid-Seventies, Marley could have afforded any car on earth. He chose the 1602.

BMW launched the 1602 (originally called the 1600-2 for its 1600-cc engine and two doors) in 1966, and it was a game changer for the Bavarian marque. *Road & Track* declared the car "a great automobile at the price." Most notably, the 1602 was the progenitor of the 2002, which debuted to rave reviews in 1968 and launched the Euro sports-coupe phenomenon that remains today.

At one point, Marley upgraded to a four-door BMW E3 2500, known in the U.S. as the Bavaria. The E3 was the predecessor of the 5-series, packing a 150-hp 2500-cc inline-six. BMW built it from 1968 to 1977. You might guess that Marley needed a roomier vehicle because he fathered at least 11 children. But apparently, he just liked the car for its initials.

Marley died of cancer in Miami in 1981 at 36, ending his magical career way too soon. His BMW E3 2500 is rumored to be in someone's garage in California. It probably still stinks of ganja.

BY **A.J. BAIME** • ILLUSTRATION BY **MIGUEL VALENZUELA**

THE LONER

NEIL YOUNG PUBLISHED a 500-page autobiography in 2012 and another of almost 400 pages two years later because he realized he hadn't talked about cars enough. He rarely has a negative word to say about the dozens and dozens he has owned, most of them clunkers, except for the finicky and overcomplicated Citroën SM (nickname: the Contrarian) he admits he was just too stoned to drive. He talks to cars. They talk to him. For years, his favorite thing to do was smoke a joint and float along through the redwoods in a big old cruiser, imagining he was back in the year when the car was made.

There are likely few people, outside of Eisenhower-era funeral-home directors, who've driven as many midcentury hearses. Young has owned four: a Buick, a Pontiac, a Packard, and then another Buick. Two of them, both named Mortimer Hearseburg (One and Two), played decisive roles his life. The last one may still yet.

Young wrote the ballad "Long May You Run" not about a female acquaintance, but for the first Mort. It's by no means Young's best or most loved song, but it is among his most lovable—sappy, funny, touched with genuine loss.

Young's mother loaned him $150 for the used hearse after he dropped out of high school. He'd been a sickly kid, a difficult and distant adolescent, and then a charismatic but volatile young man. Crowds terrified him. The thought of going to the supermarket crippled him with anxiety. He describes his moods as unpredictable, coming and going like the weather. Over and over again, when he got scared or nervous, he would slip away. It became a habit, never showing up, disappearing. No one could figure him out, least of all himself.

Mort quickly became part of his identity: "It was like this weird thing—The Band and The Car." Guys in the band had to lie down in the back, 200 miles to a gig, "like a dead man." They couldn't sit up straight. When Mort died, Young took it hard. Without a car, he wasn't sure who he was anymore. Roy with no Trigger.

So he bought another hearse, Mort Two, a 1953 Pontiac, and drove to L.A. to become a rock star. He left Ontario without telling anyone. "The great Canadian Dream is to get out," he once told *Rolling Stone*. He didn't like that his friend drove Mort rough. "I'd be laying in the back of the hearse trying to sleep, but listening instead obsessively to the transmission."

One day, his future bandmate and best friend and nemesis, Stephen Stills, noticed a hearse at an L.A. stoplight. They'd met by chance the year before, in Canada. "As soon as he saw the Ontario plates, he knew it was me. So they stopped us. I was happy to see fucking anybody I knew."

Thus began one of the most consequential musical partnerships of his life—and one of the most vexing. They loved playing together. But not much else. They were like "chalk and cheese," said Linda McCartney. A decade later, "Long May You Run" was the title track on a tuneful but lackluster collection he and Stills salvaged from an acrimoniously disrupted CSNY session. Partway through the subsequent tour, Young pulled another one of his disappearing acts. At least this time he was thoughtful enough to send a telegram. "Dear Stephen," it read, "funny how some things that start spontaneously end that way. Eat a peach, Neil."

Since then, there have been dozens if not hundreds of cars in Young's life. He collects them for their uniqueness, with little concern for their condition. He once bought a 1950 Packard Clipper that barely ran. He liked the hood ornament. "Moves like that made me start to wonder," he wrote. Elsewhere, he's wondered whether this car thing is a disease. If it is, it doesn't trouble him.

Along the way, another hearse came into the collection, an unnamed 1948 Buick Roadmaster, exactly like Mort One. Though Young has downsized the collection in recent years, he couldn't part with it. But it needs work. "If there is ever a situation where the hearse is required again, I want it to be ready," he wrote, "yet I am somehow slow in preparing, not wanting to be too ready."

BY **WILL DANA** • ILLUSTRATION BY **PAT PERRY**

KIND OF RED

ONE WINTER DAY, David Crosby stood in front of the Village Gate, a nightclub on the corner of Thompson and Bleecker Streets in Greenwich Village, when he saw a diminutive figure with an etched face approach him. The guy said in a raspy voice, "You Crosby?"

"Yes, sir, I am," said Crosby, who, at that time in 1970, was one of the most famous singer-songwriters in the world.

"I'm Miles," said Miles Davis, arguably the most famous jazz player and bandleader alive.

"Yes, sir. I know. I know that's who you are."

History would record this moment as a meeting between musical geniuses. What is not talked about is how this moment was also an intersection between two car nuts.

"I cut one of your tunes," Davis told Crosby.

Stunned, Crosby asked, "W-w-w-which tune?"

" 'Guinnevere,' " said Davis, referring to the song released on Crosby, Stills & Nash's 1968 debut record. "You wanna hear it?"

"Oh, God, yes!"

Davis pointed to his Ferrari and said, "Follow that car." Then he and a woman, whom Crosby has described numerous times as having "legs up to her neck," headed for the Ferrari. Judging by the timing, it must have been Davis's 1967 3.3-liter V-12 275 GTB/4—a masterpiece by any standard.

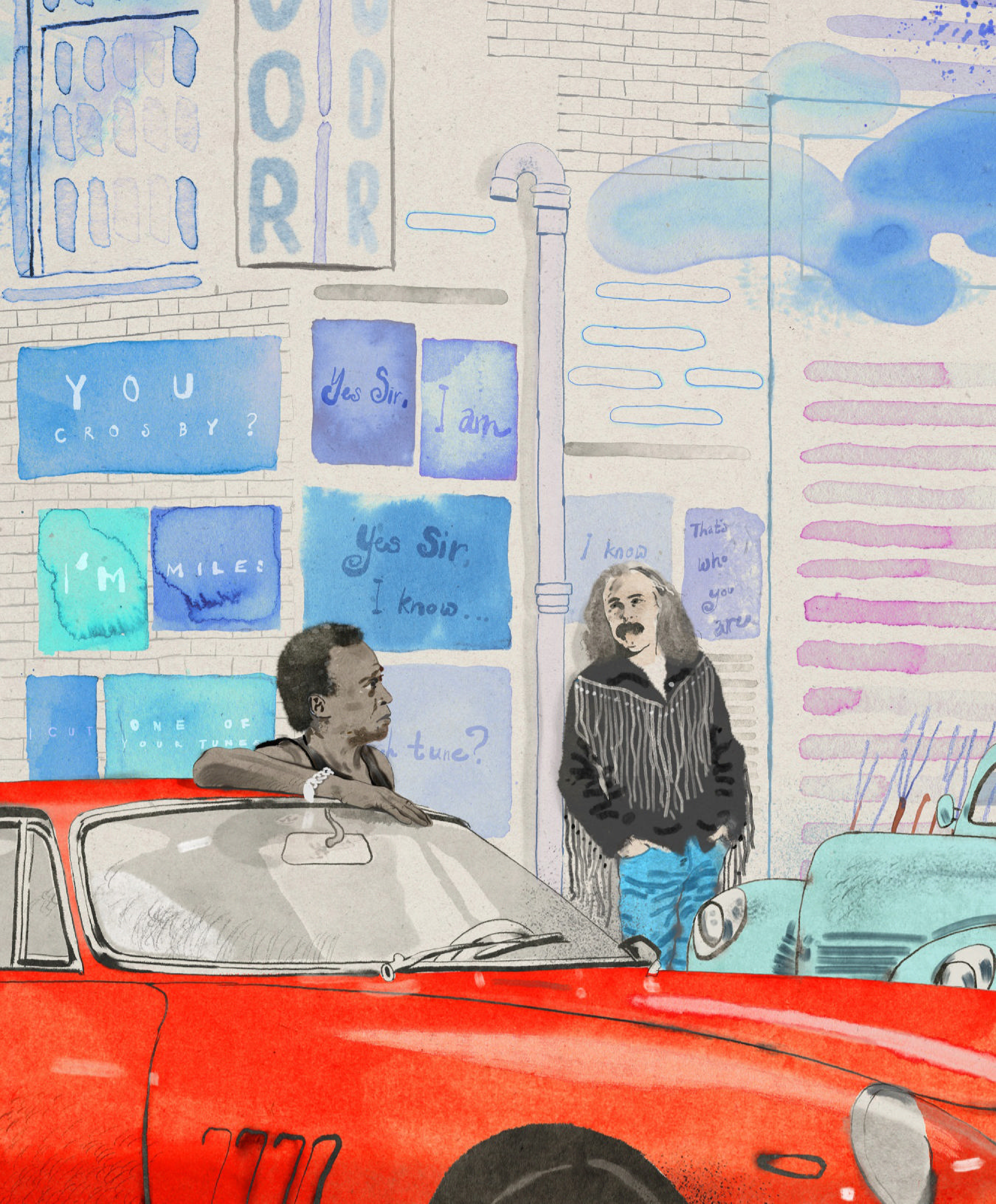
Off they went, driving uptown to Davis's place in separate cars.

By 1970, Crosby had hits with the Byrds (notably, a cut of Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man") and Buffalo Springfield. His new group, Crosby, Stills & Nash, won the Grammy for Best New Artist. Crosby's love of cars would become more pronounced with time, as he owned Ferraris, BMWs, and ultimately a 1940 small-block Ford pickup that he found at an L.A. hot-rod show.

Davis was decades beyond the *Birth of the Cool* sessions, in and out of heroin addiction, past his triumphant *Kind of Blue* recordings, and into a new experimental electric-jazz sound. He would be remembered for his lime-green Lamborghini Miura and his succession of Ferraris, including the red 275 GTB/4, a bright-yellow 308 GTSi, and a silver Testarossa.

The coda to this story? Crosby got to Davis's place and listened to his version of "Guinnevere" on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. The song lasted more than 21 minutes. It ended up on the box set *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions*. As Crosby listened, he grew increasingly irked. To him, nothing about the recording sounded anything like the "Guinnevere" he wrote. When he told Davis, the jazz master responded by throwing Crosby out of his home. Song over.

BY **A.J. BAIME** • ILLUSTRATION BY **DEREK BACON**


OOR
OOR
YOU CROSBY?
Yes Sir, I am
I'M MILES
Yes Sir, I know...
I know
That's who you are
I CUT ONE OF YOUR TUNES
h tune?

THE GILDED OUTLAW

HIP-HOP SUPERSTAR KILLER MIKE LIFTS HIS COMMUNITY WITH FOUR WHEELS.

~ BY MATT FARAH ~ PHOTOGRAPHY BY GUNNER STAHL

KILLER MIKE IS HEADED DOWN MANY PATHS,

uncertain where any of them will lead. The rapper, actor, entrepreneur, and activist—best known as one-half of the legendary rap duo Run the Jewels—should live a frantic life. Instead, he's calm and organized, a careful thinker and thoughtful speaker. Fresh off a tour with Rage Against the Machine, Mike invites *Road & Track* to his new garage in South Atlanta for a Corona and a chat. This is where Mike keeps a few of his cars, machines integral to his lofty goals for the surrounding neighborhood.

East Point, best known to outsiders for the name check in Outkast's "ATLiens," sits adjacent to Hapeville, a gentrified town buttressed by America's busiest airport. To get there, you cross literal train tracks. Body shops, upholsterers, and mechanics with hand-lettered signs thrive; this is where things get fixed. I circle the neighborhood, passing factories, dollar stores, mom-and-pop chicken restaurants, and a lovely little city hall.

At a nondescript building surrounded by chain-link fencing, Anthony greets me. Anthony is the events coordinator for VLNS (pronounced "villains"), Mike's catchall brand for his many businesses outside music. Mike is running a few minutes late, he says on a phone call, incredibly apologetic. Larry, an old-timer and lifelong mechanic, arrives. He pulls a walker from the bed of his weathered Super Duty. We chat about Fox-body Mustangs and his extensive collection of Sunbeams while Anthony rolls up the bay doors. Daylight fills the warehouse.

A former mechanic shop, this eight-bay cinder-block structure is mid-renovation. The freshly poured parking lot sets the property apart from its crumbling neighbors, though the shop's interior still smells like a whiff of gasoline evaporating through a carburetor. A dozen muted TVs every which way are tuned in to local news stations, political ads constantly flashing in the run-up to the midterm elections.

Mike arrives in a white Escalade wearing GM manufacturer plates. He's smiling. The man isn't what you'd expect from someone nicknamed "Killer" but exactly what you'd expect from Michael Render, the community organizer and Billboard Changemaker Award winner behind the ominous nom de plume. Mike hops out, gives dap and a hug, and ambles over to the shop's lounge. He's magnetic, drawing attention from every corner of the large room. Part of this is thanks to Killer Mike's sheer size, but mostly it's the calm confidence earned from decades spent captivating stadiums full of screaming fans.

I ask about the Caddy.

"They gave me that for doing the commercial," Mike says. "I asked for the Escalade-V, the fast one, the one in the actual spot, but it wasn't available yet. Imma keep bugging 'em, though. I want that shit. Have you heard it? That [C7] Z06 motor in a truck? That's fuckin' fire, man."

I'm going to like this guy.

We sit at the black-painted plywood bar while our photographer, Gunner Stahl, sets up. Mike unpacks a backpack. He grabs a few pairs of his trademark square-rimmed glasses in varying tint levels, laying them out light to dark. He draws a thick gold chain from the bag and a couple of matching bracelets. Then comes the Rolex Datejust with an iced-out bezel. He throws it all on for the photos. While Stahl shoots Mike posing with a Cutlass, garage manager Swiff (a.k.a.

A. Killer Mike in his South Atlanta garage with some of his machinery. Foreground: A Hellcat featured in his Netflix documentary series, *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike*.

A

A

B

Cutmaster Swiff, who spins for Atlanta's famous hip-hop duo, Outkast) tells me about their plans for the building.

"We just got this place, but it's coming along. It's going to be so much more than a garage. It's going to be an event space, a creative agency, a gathering spot, a place to keep cars, a place for people to create stuff," Swiff says.

"We don't really know exactly what the endpoint is," Mike says from across the room. "But we have time to figure it out. We got it cheap, at the right time, you know? I really want to take over this whole block. We even got the buildings next door." He gestures in the direction of a much larger two-building compound outside.

The photo session ends. The chains and jewels get stuffed back into the bag. Mike talks about using his money from music to buy up nearby real estate and open local businesses in his neighborhood, providing jobs in the process.

"We got the barbershops; those are going well. The people who owned them before didn't have the best reputation, so we had to get creative. We started giving Hot Wheels to the kids who would come in for haircuts, and they wanted to keep coming back to collect them," Mike says. "Then I started parking my cars out in front of the shops, which got their dads interested in coming down too. It worked, and now those businesses are doing well. I've got one of my Trans Ams down there right now."

Mike's also finishing the renovation of neighborhood staple Bankhead Seafood in conjunction with Atlanta rapper T.I. All of this disparate work in East Point brings Killer Mike's mission into focus.

"I love Cars & Coffee events, but they didn't have that stuff when I was growing up, and even now they don't have Cars & Coffee in my neighborhood. With these buildings and parking lots, we can have regular events to get people from the neighborhood involved in cars early, so they can be inspired by them the way I was. Once we renovate this space, we can rent the space out for events. We use my team to help with the creative, and we can bring big business into East Point, make it a destination, you know?"

I wonder aloud how Killer Mike juggles full-time duties as a musician with his second life as a community organizer.

"It's all about putting people into positions who can handle the day to day for you. I sing and dance for a living. That's what I do. Then when I have an idea for a business, I put people in charge who can do it full time," he says. The conversation moves to the six cars in the shop.

"That one is the late-night ride," he says, pointing to a blacked-out Hellcat on nice wheels with aftermarket Brembos, made famous by his TV show *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike*. "There's nothing better than going out at 1 a.m. when the roads are empty and just tearing it up for a bit in that. The Benz is technically [his wife] Shay's, but I take it most of the time because she likes her Range Rover." Nodding at a drop-top donk, he says, "That thing I got off a friend of mine, a rapper I really respect. He sold it to me. I don't drive it much because these roads around here are rough on big wheels like

C

that, but once or twice a year, it's perfect when you gotta roll up to a barbecue. And this Cutlass is my newest buy. It's totally original, and it's mint."

He isn't wrong. The car has one of the tightest door slams I've seen from an American car of this period. Mike has always aspired to own American classics, a taste he picked up from his block, with neighbors who customized their cars and others who went drag-racing on weekends. In his shop, next to the 1971 Chevy Impala donk, sits Swiff's 1982 Corvette T-top on Torq Thrusts and a 1966 Buick Skylark, which looks like Chip Foose could have built it for *Overhaulin'*.

"And there were always the Black professionals, the accountants, the engineers, the lawyers, they always had really nice big American cars. So that's what I grew up seeing people drive. And my first car was an Eighties G-body Regal, so that's why I'm into the Grand Nationals now. The Grand National is an outlaw's car. All black, looks mean, like a movie outlaw, a movie villain. We always cheer for them, and they always have a cool car."

A. Mike and his associates have big plans for the garage. They'd like it to be an event space and house a creative agency.
B. Mike's newest purchase is the 1972 Olds Cutlass in the foreground, all original except for the mod wheels.
C. Not all of Mike's precious metal sits on wheels.

A

A. Big, old American iron dominates Mike's collection. They're the cars he grew up admiring. The Mercedes S550 coupe was his wife's until she decided she preferred a Range Rover.

B. Part of Mike's mission is to use his cars to inspire automotive enthusiasm in the next generation.

"What is it about criminals and cars that goes together so well?" I muse.

"Don't get it confused," Mike says. "I said outlaws. 'Criminal' brings in a set of rules written by other people with their own agendas. At one time in this state, slavery was legal, and if you freed slaves, you were a criminal."

Point taken.

"Not just that," Mike says. "But, like, think about Prohibition: They made alcohol illegal, and you had these moonshine runners using their cars to smuggle stuff. Now those moonshine runners are American legends. Both were considered criminals, but now we respect both kinds of folks for being outlaws, antiheroes."

It's how NASCAR got its start.

"Exactly. Those were outlaws, but they were only criminals because of an unjust legal system. That spirit is where my brand VLNS comes from," Mike says. "You see this shit?" he continues, pointing at one of the TVs. A chyron notes that rural voters of a certain stripe are more motivated to vote than their urban counterparts. "We got a lot of work to do on shit like this."

I mention seeing Mike tweet about driving people to the polls. "I use that Escalade for that! It's like a big bus. I don't tell people who to vote for or how to vote. But making sure they have the opportunity to vote for their own future and leadership is crucial to the survival of this country and my community."

"Did that begin once you became famous and felt like you had to speak up for people?" I ask.

"No, it came from my grandmother. I remember being five, six years old, riding around in her car, taking people to the polls. This goes way back, long before music. Music is what I love, what relaxes me. But this is who I am." Mike doesn't like being tied to any particular political party or movement, though you don't end up on tour with Rage Against the Machine without raising a clenched fist at the man. "I engage with all kinds of people, and I like to have friends different from me," Mike says. Having seen some episodes of *Trigger Warning*, I can't help but agree.

"I like bringing people together, all different kinds of people. Cars do that," Mike tells me. "No matter what you believe politically, a car can give two very different people something to relate to on a fundamental level."

I offer Mike a go in the $170,000 Porsche Taycan GTS I borrowed for my trip to Atlanta—it's a vehicle wholly unlike the brash Americana filling his shop. We hit the highway, and Killer Mike drives the Porsche EV, well, like one might drive a blacked-out Hellcat after midnight.

"Sometimes, if you're in that mood and going fast helps clear your mind," Mike says, "it's worth taking the ticket." The lack of noise, paired with abundant power, catches him off guard. "This thing is what you need to drive real wild and also be really polite. It's cool. I'm into it."

"One of these would make a great criminal's car," I chime in.

"You mean outlaw," he replies.

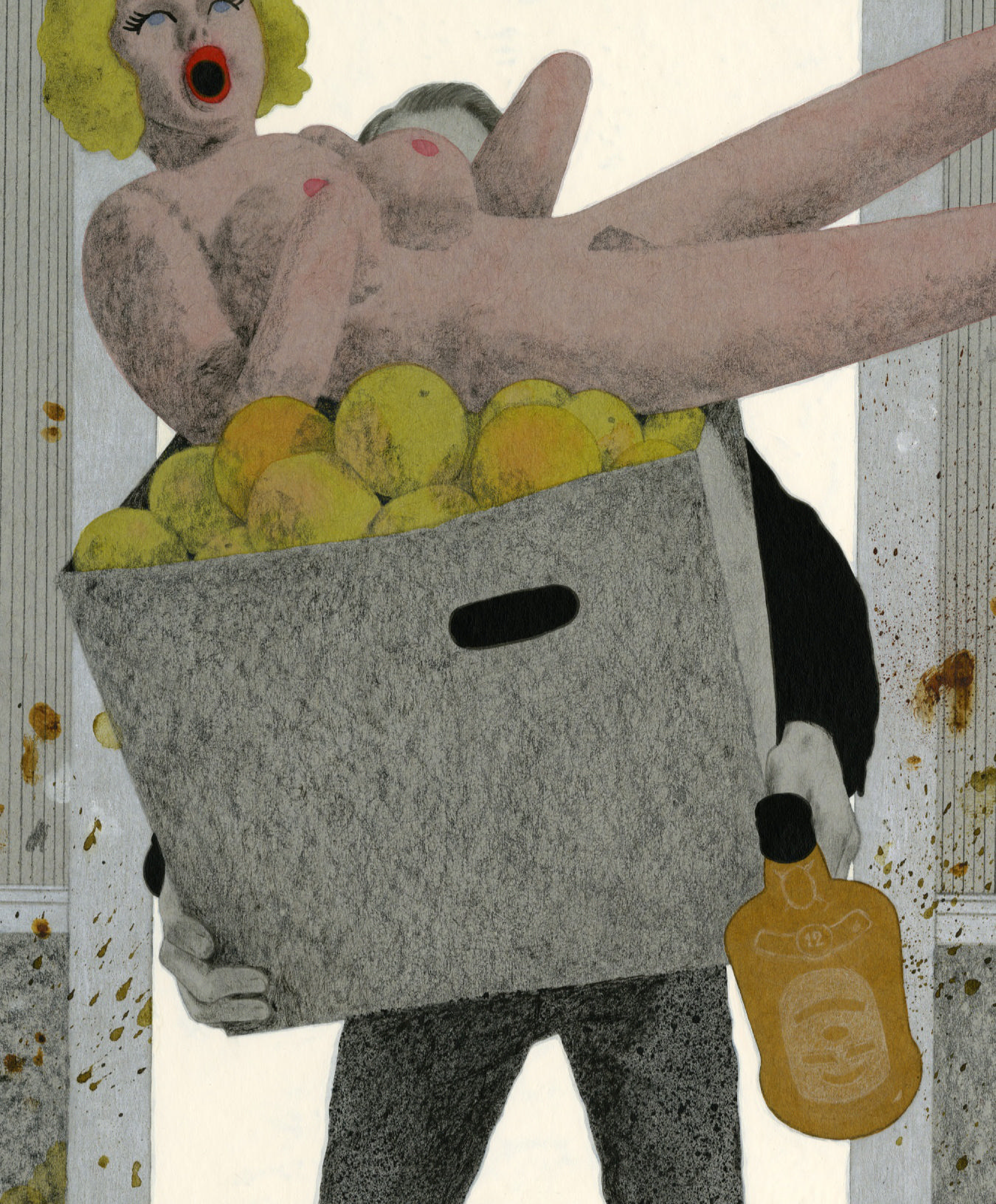
"Exactly."

JUST HOW WEIRD CAN YOU STAND IT, BUBBA, BEFORE YOUR LOVE WILL CRACK?

HUNTER S. THOMPSON BROUGHT HIS ASSISTANT ON A WILD ROAD TRIP TO FIND DRUMMER GINGER BAKER. THEY FOUND BAKER—AND THE ASSISTANT'S BREAKING POINT.

BY **COREY SEYMOUR**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **EDWARD KINSELLA**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MY DECADE-LONG STINT as Hunter S. Thompson's assistant began as auspiciously as one might imagine: in the grips of an apocalyptic hangover. I had spent the previous night with Hunter trying to match his substance intake in a ridiculous attempt to prove my bona fides (something I never tried again). But I couldn't get back into Hunter's suite the next morning. I somehow managed to persuade Carlyle hotel security to take the door off the hinges—while assuring the hotel brass that everything inside was completely fine. Hunter, I told them, was a "deep sleeper."

Once inside, I mumbled to the manager something about "medication" to explain what looked like, at first glance, a corpse on the bed. Then I shooed him away and, on instruction from HST headquarters back in Colorado, administered a very large Mexican amphetamine pill. "Put the pill in his mouth, pour some water in, and massage his throat for a bit," I was instructed. Having given our family's miniature schnauzer anti-seizure medication in a similar fashion, I thought this seemed eminently achievable.

If you're not of a certain age or a student of gonzo journalism, Hunter is the lunatic whom Johnny Depp portrayed in 1998's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, based on Thompson's landmark 1971 book. I didn't want to be the one who inevitably found him dead, so I crouched down to mattress level and was relieved to see Hunter's chest rising and falling almost imperceptibly. Thirty minutes later, Hunter was vertical. An hour later, to the soundtrack of *Out of Our Heads*, the 1965 Stones album I'd brought along in a blatant attempt to both impress and placate Hunter (check, check), his cheeks were vibrating like a paint-can shaker. A day later, I cemented my new job as Gonzo Assistant at Large. The new gig brought urgent middle-of-the-night phone calls from Hunter's home in Woody Creek, Colorado. "Corey!" he'd announce. "I'm out back welding furniture with Warren Zevon—say hi—but you need to tell Jann [that's Jann S. Wenner, *Rolling Stone*'s founder and editor] that he's nuttier than a fruitcake if he expects me to have this story to him anytime soon." There was also a flurry of faxes. My favorite was a contract that needed only his signature: Hunter scrawled a giant "X" through the document, adding for emphasis at the bottom, "EAT SHIT AND DIE."

Soon enough, I experienced my first road trip with Hunter to attend the 1994 U.S. Open Polo Championship held that September at the Meadowbrook Polo Club in Old Westbury, Long Island—a reporting expedition for what was meant to be his next book, already titled *Polo Is My Life*.

Hunter, who considered himself an excellent and fearless driver, is well known for his beloved 1973 Chevrolet Caprice Classic convertible, a.k.a. the Red Shark. But that was in the barn back in Woody Creek. So I procured a forlorn 1995 Lincoln Town Car in Portofino Blue Metallic and delivered it to the haughty Garden City Hotel, where Hunter had set up shop about nine miles from the polo grounds. It now fell upon me to tend to his various needs (from the chemical to the practical to the spiritual), cajole him into actually attending the tournament, and (it's painful even to type this) try to get him to write something. Anything.

I'd brought him the supplies he'd requested: an inflatable sex doll, a large box filled with fresh grapefruit (adhering to his lifelong devotion to quality citrus), and a handle of Chivas.

Nights in Hunter's suite followed a pattern: We ordered room service, we drank, we made plans to watch some polo matches, and we tried to scare up some fun. One night, around midnight, Hunter suggested I blow up the sex doll—*"This is a five-star hotel, goddammit!"*—and wander around the lobby with Mona, as we called her, to see how people reacted.

Hunter loved the horrible scene I made in the lobby and gleefully fired off a fax to Jann: "Corey should be fired. He went crazy out here with a sex doll and almost got me evicted."

What Hunter didn't do was watch polo matches, which take place during daylight hours—a time Hunter, who often didn't wake up until the middle of the afternoon, wasn't entirely comfortable with. Instead, I would attend the matches and report back to him.

Then we heard that Ginger Baker—the legendary drummer for Cream and, oddly, a retired olive farmer and avid polo player—would be at some tournament cocktail function at the Huntington Hilton. It was 20 minutes away. Hunter and Ginger were friends. So off we went.

Or not.

Getting Hunter anywhere was an ordeal that had more in common with fighting a ground war on multiple fronts than merely getting up and going somewhere. That we were already grievously late should be, by now, a given. Adding to the complications, though: Hunter—already toggling between splenetic, vitriolic, and plain pissed off—was, let's just say, experiencing the passage of time on a different, more accelerated schedule than what most of us would consider normal. This led to an awkward scene in the hotel lobby as Hunter—in his usual madras jacket, khaki pants, and Chuck Taylors, wearing tinted shooting glasses at night, and carrying a pint-size tumbler filled with ice and Chivas—began barking loudly to anyone within earshot: "*Where's the valet? I'm Ben Franklin, and I want my car now, goddammit! I've been waiting for 45 fucking minutes!*" I had, in reality, handed our ticket to the valet about five minutes earlier.

Thankfully, the Town Car finally pulled up to the front of the hotel. I quickly judged Hunter's condition—he'd seemingly slept very little in days, for starters—and made what I thought was a strong and confident move that he'd respect: "I'll drive," I said, striding purposefully toward the driver's side of the car. Hunter responded instantly with two well-chosen words—"*Fuck that!*"—and elbowed me out of his way.

Humbled and more than a little embarrassed, I stepped back to the passenger's side, where a valet was holding the door open for me. When I looked inside the car, I became amazed that the man was able to keep a straight face. At my feet, as I settled into my seat, was a pile of broken wineglasses. Scattered around the back seat was an array of empty liquor bottles and an odd assortment of, let's say, unusual and very specific porno magazines (*Leg Show* would be norm-core here) and a few double-dong dildos in bright fluorescent colors. Smudged across the length of the dashboard in front of us was a hectic pattern of cocaine residue.

Hunter had a phrase he trotted out occasionally in both published stories and private correspondence: "Just how weird can you stand it, Bubba, before your love will crack?" Even before I started working with Hunter, my tolerance for weird—and for dangerous, ill-advised, foolhardy, ill-thought, the whole kit and caboodle—was quite high. Having already served as his majordomo on at least one campaign had left me almost cocky about my ability to handle whatever he threw at me, even literally. Hunter's favorite thing to do after you'd knocked on his hotel door and heard him yell "Come in!" was to hurl a heavy object at you—a large book, a beer bottle, a prosthetic limb, or, on one occasion, a hatchet—to see how quickly you'd react. Catch it and the result was instant good karma. Miss it and the mood in the room returned to what was often the baseline: doom and failure. We seemed to be redlining the weird meter—but I had no idea what was about to happen.

Hunter stomped on the accelerator and lurched us forward, pulling the impressive trick of plowing the extended nose of the car into the street where the steepish downhill of the hotel driveway met the road in front of us while also scrapping the back end on the same incline. Sparks flew. *"Where the hell are we going, Corey?!"* Hunter barked. "Uhhhhh . . ." I answered, having zero idea even what vague direction we needed to point ourselves toward. *"Where, goddammit?!"* Hunter raged.

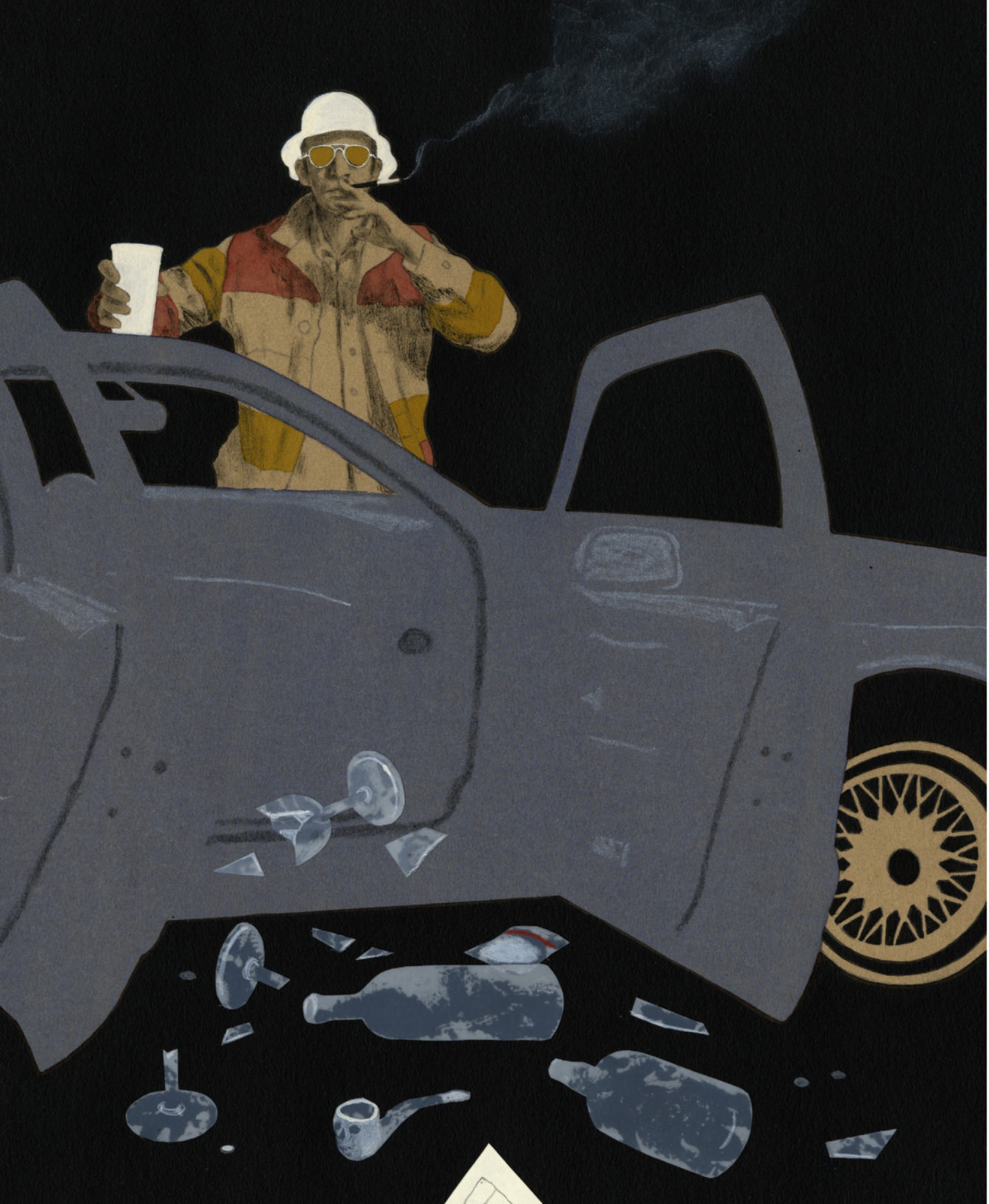
My solution was to suggest stopping at a service station to ask for directions. For a control freak like Hunter, this was a violent betrayal of everything he stood for, but he soon went screaming into a gas station and slammed on the brakes. I emerged from the car, walked over to an attendant, politely asked for directions, and listened carefully to his 37-point plan, comprehending roughly 10 percent of what he was telling me. Sensing Hunter's impatience, I didn't ask the man to repeat anything and simply returned to the car.

"What the fuck were you talking to him about?" Hunter seethed. "Directions," I said, silently willing us forward with every cell in my body. Hunter's mania was soon compounded by his inability to find his radar detector. We looked under our seats as we drove toward the Long Island Expressway. Then, still looking for it, I climbed into the back seat as the car fishtailed on the entrance ramp to the LIE. We continued searching and gathering speed, hunting underneath the sun visors and spelunking between the seats. Hunter screamed an impressively long but terrifying string of obscenities and, at one point, raised his hand quickly, balled it into a fist, and seemed about to punch me in the head—enough so that my hands went up to protect myself. But the punch never came, and in short order, we found the Fuzzbuster.

It was in the glove compartment.

Now we were moving: 107 mph eastbound on the LIE in the darkness, Hunter weaving back and forth over the center line while holding the steering wheel with his left pinkie, ring finger, and thumb—the other two fingers were, of course, clamped on his cigarette holder finished with a lit Dunhill Red. Meanwhile, his right hand held that tumbler of Chivas. Directly below that hand on the floor of the car was a bucket filled with ice that also served as a kind of ad hoc ashtray, and on my lap was Hunter's prized shaving kit, which contained multitudes of uppers and downers, weed, hash, and maybe 40 grams of cocaine. Every few minutes, I'd light up Hunter's skull-shaped hash pipe and hold it while he turned his head sideways to toke, and now and again, Hunter would careen the car wildly toward the shoulder, slam on the brakes, and snort cocaine off the dashboard. Back on the highway and back up to speed, I began to seriously consider the likelihood of us both dying on this drive—or, more hopefully, perhaps we'd simply be arrested, whereupon I, as the one literally holding the bag, might be facing something like life in prison.

Perhaps sensing that my mind was wandering into fever-dream territory, Hunter brought me back to the present by turning off the car's headlights. We now flew down a road neither of us knew, at roughly double the legal speed limit,



in what was essentially an illicit mobile pharmacology lab piloted by two patients in an uncontrolled and constantly evolving experiment. Hunter giggled and demanded I tell him the real-life locations of East Egg and West Egg from *The Great Gatsby*. I guessed wrong, further enraging him. (In fact, we were quite near the area at that present moment.) Then he said something about judging good drivers from bad ones by observing whether they accelerated through the apex when turning. Utterly terrified—but knowing that if I dared show it, Hunter would only try to fan the flames—I stared out the window and thought about my mom.

We arrived. Hunter pulled into the overstuffed parking area of the Hilton, threw the Town Car into park, and abandoned the vehicle. I was so relieved to be alone—and not to have him at the wheel—that I luxuriated in the moment until a valet rapped on my window and told me to move the car.

Inside, polo players and assorted hangers-on packed the hotel bar. Hunter graciously asked me what I was having, and I said, "Margarita, rocks, salt." "Two margaritas, rocks, salt," Hunter told the bartender. Forty-five seconds later, Hunter began screaming, *"It's been 45 fucking minutes—where the hell are my drinks?!"* The bartender ignored him, but after another few minutes, two margaritas magically appeared. Never in my life had I needed a drink like I needed this one, and I reached out to grab the glass on the right.

Bam! Hunter's fist came crashing down on my hand. *"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"* Then I remembered that Hunter usually ordered his drinks two—sometimes three or four—at a time. I ordered my own goddamn drink.

Finally, we found Ginger Baker amid the throng—a tiny, bearded grump who spoke in an odd, lilting South London accent, which was, at times, utterly indecipherable. Imagine what a mythical English hillbilly might sound like and you're halfway there. The three of us stepped outside—but not that far outside and, in fact, directly underneath a large overhead light illuminating the parking lot, in easy eyesight of a security guard maybe 40 feet away. Hunter brought out the skull-shaped hash pipe, I handed him a lighter, and he handed me the shaving kit.

"If anything weird goes down," Hunter instructed me, "just hold on to this and take off running."

As Hunter and Ginger chatted away, I absent-mindedly contemplated how bizarre it was to listen to a legend who redefined journalism with drug-soaked, first-person narratives about politics and the American dream talking to another legend who brought jazz and African rhythms to the world of rock drumming—and to hear them nattering on about playing polo, in the parking lot of a Hilton hotel, on Long Island. I learned later that Hunter served on the board of directors of Ginger's Colorado-based Mile High Polo Club, assuming such a board—or such a club—existed in real life and not just on T-shirts and stationery letterheads. I got the distinct sense that Ginger, like Hunter, was a handful, something confirmed a few years later when my *Rolling Stone* colleague David Fricke noted in an article that "you get close to Baker at your peril." Mostly, though, I thought of who I might ring up with my proverbial one phone call in the event of my arrest.

The ride back to Garden City was benign—by comparison, at least. I mean, sure, Hunter was beginning to do something I'd never seen or heard him do before: He was starting to speak in mostly indecipherable tongues, something with a vaguely French accent, a recurring phrase about "Ze boys. Ze boys bring me ze whis-keeeeee. . . ." But his driving was steady and less aggressive than earlier.

We arrived at the Garden City Hotel in the wee hours and headed back up to Ben Franklin's suite. Hunter curled up into a fetal position, continuing to speak about "ze boys" as I tried, for hours, to make a break for it, each time pressed into some odd kind of servitude to extend my stay. As the sun began to rise, though, I made my escape and soon found myself back in my rental car, stuck in traffic amid the weekday-morning Long Island commuter crowd.

"Just how weird can you stand it, Bubba, before your love will crack?" That Long Island trip, for me, answered the question. I took a sabbatical from active-duty Hunter patrol after that. Not to worry: We cranked up what Hunter always called the Fun Machine soon again thereafter.

As for *Polo Is My Life*: 18 years after Hunter's death, the book still hasn't come out, though *Rolling Stone* published what it billed as an excerpt a few months after our trip. Hunter didn't get out to Meadowbrook to see more than a few chukkers, but we're talking about the guy who traveled to Zaire in 1974 to see Foreman and Ali's Rumble in the Jungle and then skipped the actual fight.

Two nights after our late-night Ginger Baker run, Hunter called the valet at the Garden City Hotel to ask that his Town Car be brought around again, only to be told they had no such car in their possession. The following afternoon, someone found it parked in the middle of a large, muddy field surrounded by trees on the edge of town. By the looks of the mud tracks leading up to the car's resting place, Hunter had been spinning wild 360s until eventually becoming stuck and abandoning ship.

Hunter had no memory of any of this—or of how he got back to his hotel. But when he learned that the keys were still in the ignition when the car was found—and that the driver's-side door was wide open, the gentle *ping, ping, ping* alert calling out to someone, anyone, for help—his heart was filled with a fulsome glee.

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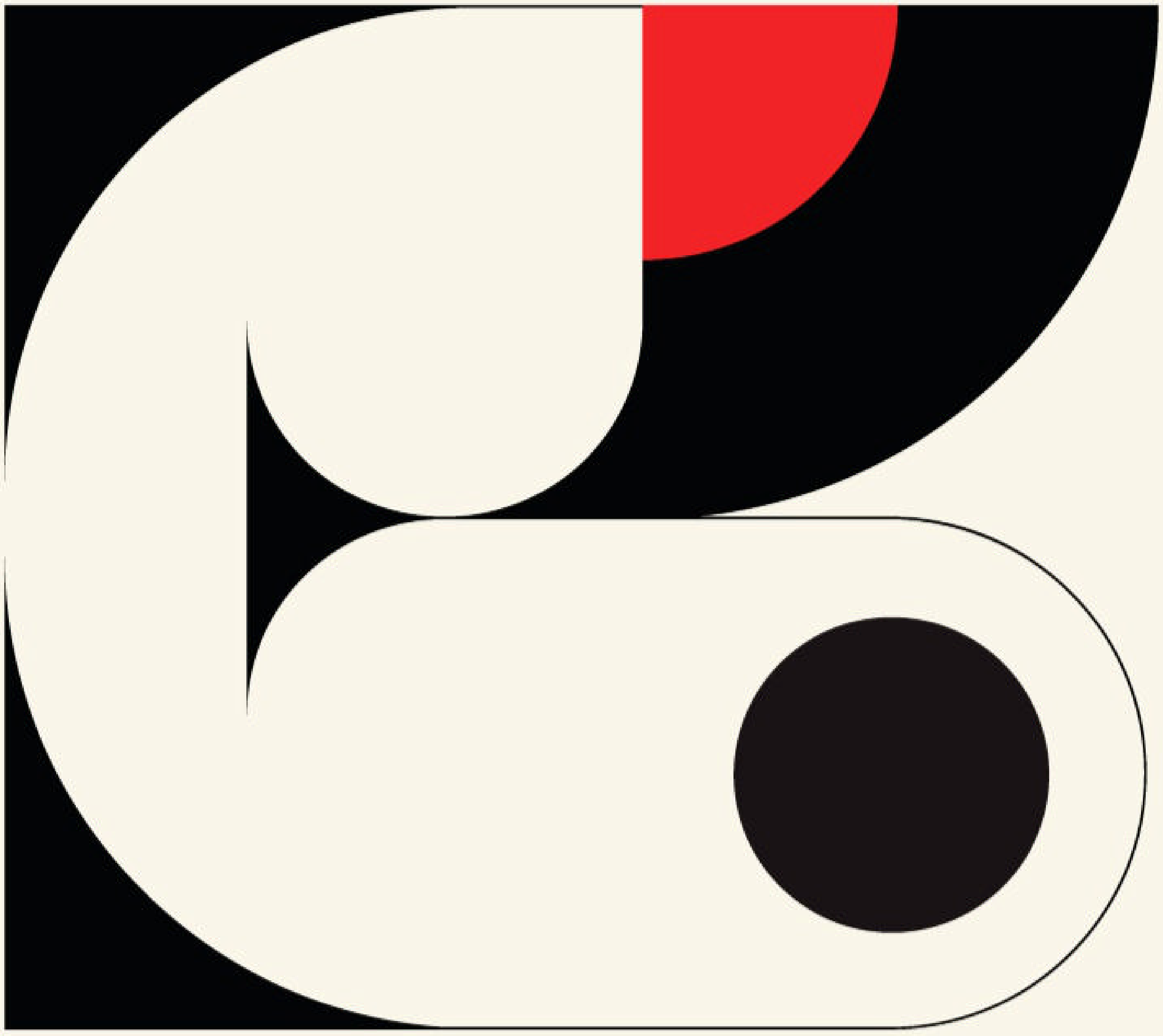
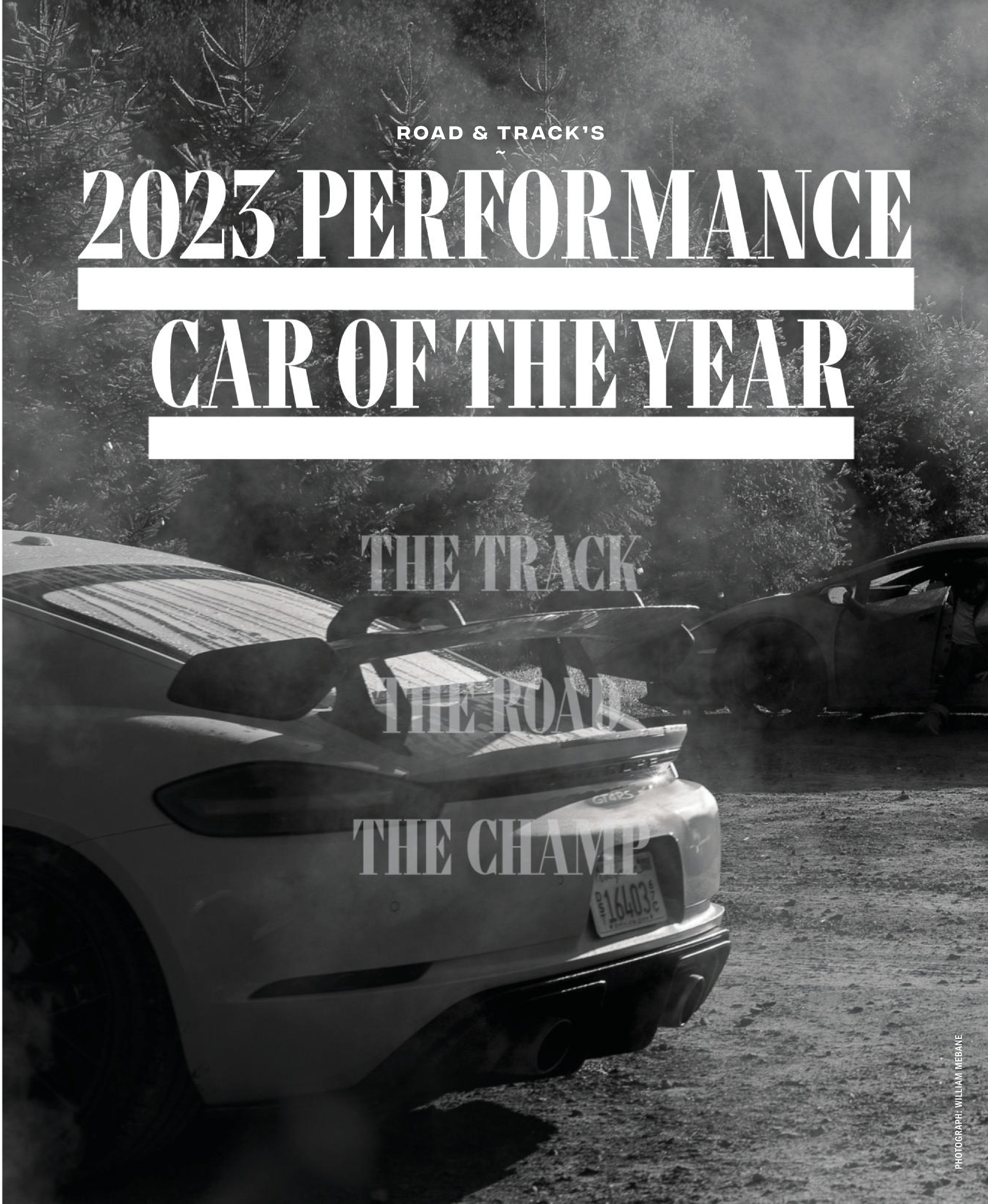


SECTION 3 PLAYLIST:

"Alone Again" The Weeknd / "In France They Kiss on Main Street" Joni Mitchell
"It Was a Good Day" Ice Cube / "Cannonball" The Breeders / "I've Been Everywhere" Johnny Cash
"Solsbury Hill" Peter Gabriel / "Down on the Street" The Stooges
"China Cat Sunflower/I Know You Rider" Grateful Dead / "Warm Leatherette" Grace Jones

ILLUSTRATION BY **ADAM G, TRÜF**



ROAD & TRACK'S

2023 PERFORMANCE CAR OF THE YEAR

THE TRACK

THE ROAD

THE CHAMP

PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM MEBANE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DW BURNETT** AND **WILLIAM MEBANE**

From the Editor

WELCOME TO *ROAD & TRACK*'S 2023 PERFORMANCE CAR OF THE YEAR ISSUE.

The 2023 Performance Car of the Year is the 10th annual testing and ranking of *R&T*'s favorite new sports cars on the road. In my mind, that's enough time to call it a legacy. The life cycle of some performance cars is about a decade, at which point technology and taste usually render their platforms obsolete. The Lamborghini Huracán, for instance, is slated to close out its stellar 10-year run in 2024, marking the end of a model that lifted the brand's sales and performance far beyond expectations.

The Cars

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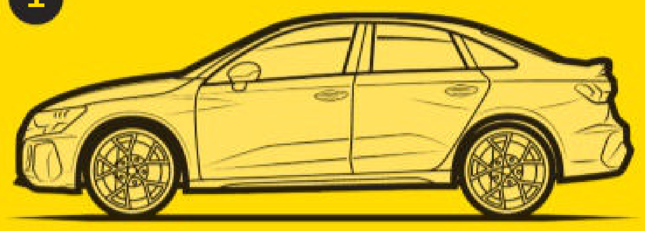

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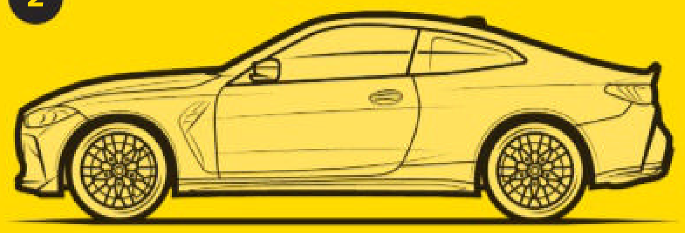

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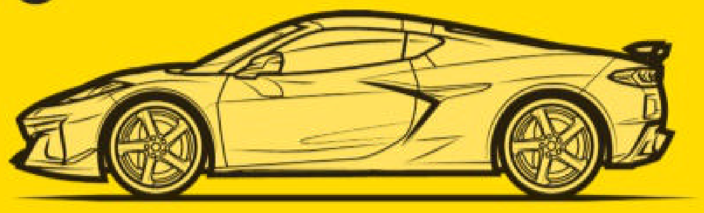

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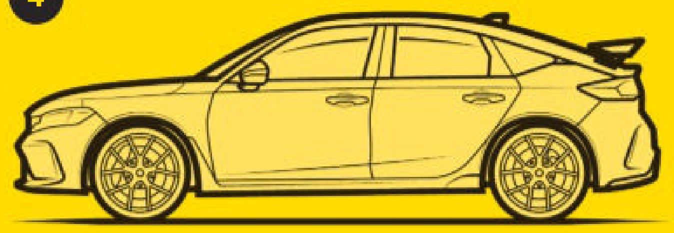

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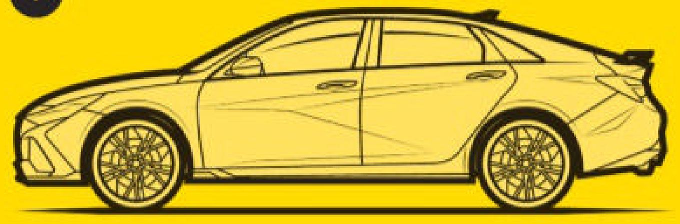


1

2023 Audi RS3

A snorty turbocharged five-cylinder engine, all-wheel drive, and a small footprint—it's the classic Audi rally formula, modernized. The new RS3 might not be a Group B racer, but it is a far more charming and engaging machine than its predecessor.

Price
$67,690
Engine
2.5-liter turbocharged inline-5
Output
401 hp @ 6500 rpm
369 lb-ft @ 3500 rpm
Transmission
7-speed dual-clutch automatic
Curb Weight
3639 lb

2

2023 BMW M4 CSL

M and CSL: The most legendary letters in BMW's arsenal, together again. It has the same engine as the Competition model, but with 543 hp and 479 lb-ft for the rear wheels to deal with and a claimed 240 fewer pounds to push. The CSL is the ultimate M4 for track-day superfans and back-road heroes.

Price
$145,395
Engine
3.0-liter twin-turbocharged inline-6
Output
543 hp @ 6250 rpm
479 lb-ft @ 2750 rpm
Transmission
8-speed automatic
Curb Weight
3640 lb

3

2023 Chevrolet Corvette Z06

The Ferrari from Bowling Green, Kentucky. Chevrolet's latest Z06 features the most powerful naturally aspirated production V-8 ever. That's 670 hp from a high-revving 5.5-liter flat-planer. The Z06 is also significantly wider and more aero-laden than a Stingray. It is a beast.

Price
$166,205
Engine
5.5-liter V-8
Output
670 hp @ 8400 rpm
460 lb-ft @ 6300 rpm
Transmission
8-speed dual-clutch automatic
Curb Weight
3666 lb

4

2023 Honda Civic Type R

For the new 2023 model, Honda has toned down the Civic Type R's juvenile styling excesses. But don't take that to mean it's been tamed. At 315 hp, it is the most powerful Honda-branded car ever sold in the U.S. That power routes through a sublime six-speed manual on its way to the front tires.

Price
$45,771
Engine
2.0-liter turbocharged inline-4
Output
315 hp @ 6500 rpm
310 lb-ft @ 2600 rpm
Transmission
6-speed manual
Curb Weight
3183 lb

5

2023 Hyundai Elantra N

Another banger from Hyundai's cadre of former BMW M engineers. Greater than the sum of its humble parts, the 2.0-liter turbo four provides 276 hp and 289 lb-ft, putting power to the front wheels through a six-speed manual or an eight-speed dual-clutch gearbox and a trick diff.

Price
$34,145
Engine
2.0-liter turbocharged inline-4
Output
276 hp @ 6000 rpm
289 lb-ft @ 2100 rpm
Transmission
6-speed manual
Curb Weight
3190 lb

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **CLINT FORD**

We included one of the last Huracán variants—the $300,000-plus Tecnica—in this year's test. The legacy of the Huracán is undeniable, but is it PCOTY?

The whole staff flew in from around the country to gather at Monticello Motor Club in blustery upstate New York. We spent a couple of days tearing apart tires on the track, then turned our attention to road performance. Ultimately, it's not only numbers we're after but a feeling.

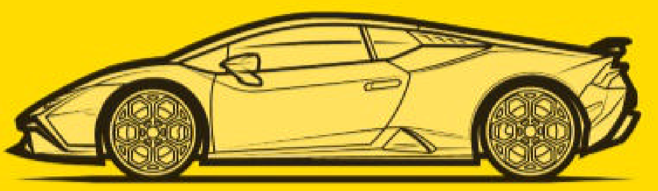
We evaluate a mix. There are showboats like the Lamborghini, as well as performance compacts such as the Toyota GR Corolla and the Honda Civic Type R. We included the Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 RS, the Audi RS3, the Subaru WRX, the BMW M4 CSL, and the new Nissan Z. One of the staff favorites was the Hyundai Elantra N, which bears little resemblance to the base Elantra beyond its platform (for the record, the Hyundai Veloster N won the 2020 PCOTY).

A legendary name that joined us is the new Corvette Z06. Now in a mid-engine configuration, the Corvette has been tearing ass down America's highways for a decade longer than Lamborghini has been making cars. But does it deserve the 2023 PCOTY? Read on to find out.

Mike

MIKE GUY
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

6



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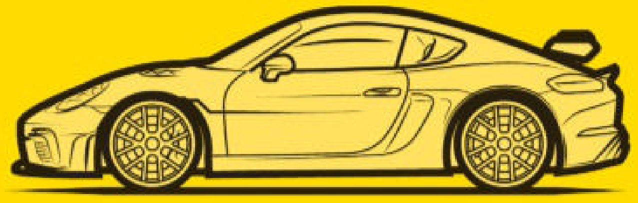

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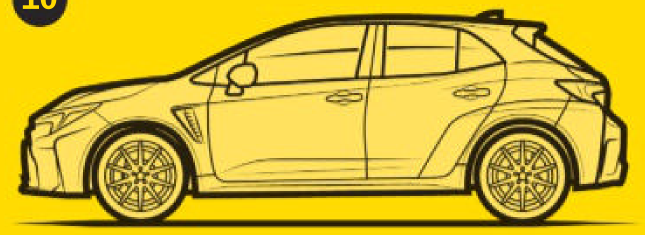

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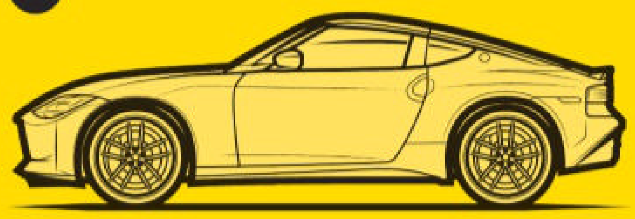

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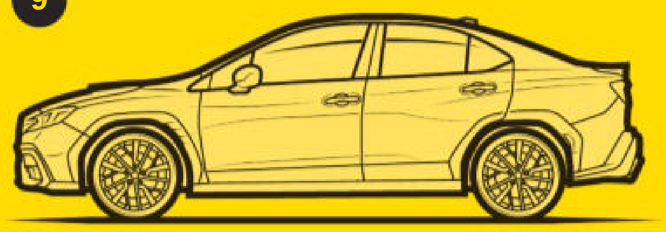

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2023 Lamborghini Huracán Tecnica
A toned-down take on the raucous Huracán STO, if any Lamborghini can be considered toned down. Optimized for road use but still a blast on the track, the Tecnica shares the STO's powertrain but adds luxuries such as a complete interior and even some rear visibility. Still, *pazza*.

Price
$342,595
Engine
5.2-liter V-10
Output
631 hp @ 8000 rpm
417 lb-ft @ 6500 rpm
Transmission
7-speed dual-clutch automatic
Curb Weight
3040 lb (dry)

7

2023 Nissan Z Performance
Reborn again, the latest Z-car gets handsome new styling and a stonking 400-hp twin-turbo V-6. And it's still available with a manual transmission. Toyota had BMW engineer the current Supra, but the newest Z is all Nissan.

Price
$53,210
Engine
3.0-liter twin-turbocharged V-6
Output
400 hp @ 6400 rpm
350 lb-ft @ 1600 rpm
Transmission
6-speed manual
Curb Weight
3507 lb

8

2023 Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 RS
The Cayman Complex is finally ending, along with the Cayman as we know it. Before it goes all-electric in its next generation, Porsche's GT department borrowed the 4.0-liter flat-six from the 911 GT3, popped it in the Cayman's unflappable chassis, and put the airbox right behind your head. It's one hell of an *auf Wiedersehen*!

Price
$195,100
Engine
4.0-liter flat-6
Output
493 hp @ 8400 rpm
331 lb-ft @ 6250 rpm
Transmission
7-speed dual-clutch automatic
Curb Weight
3227 lb

9

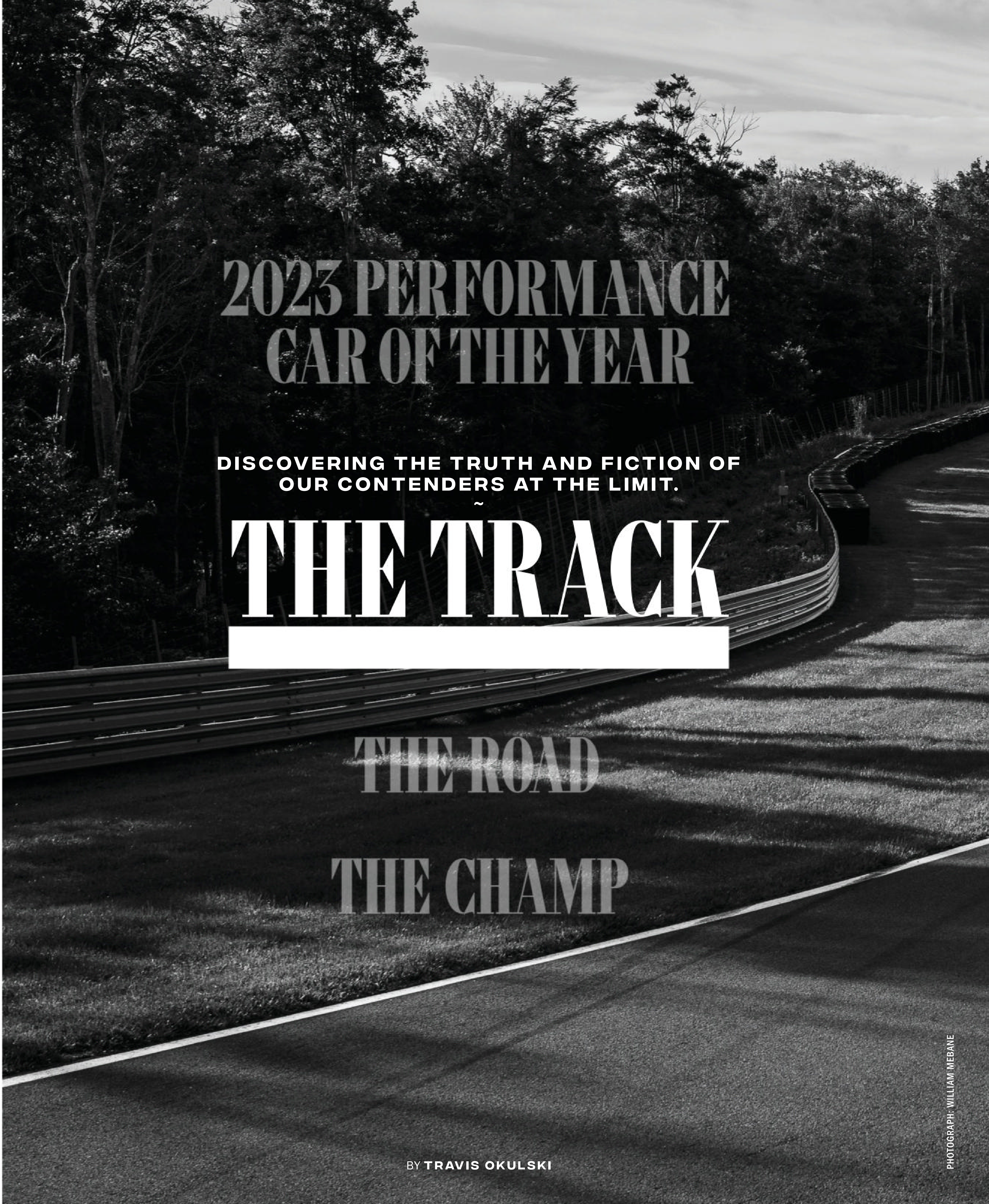
2022 Subaru WRX
The archetypal rally-bred sport compact is all-new again. A 2.4-liter engine borrowed from the Ascent SUV provides 271 hp to all four wheels, while a six-speed manual remains the base transmission. The WRX still starts at under $32,000, so budget performance is alive and well.

Price
$37,490
Engine
2.4-liter turbocharged boxer-4
Output
271 hp @ 5600 rpm
258 lb-ft @ 2000 rpm
Transmission
6-speed manual
Curb Weight
3401 lb

10

2023 Toyota GR Corolla Morizo Edition
Behold the almost-homologation hot hatch. Gazoo Racing's take on the Corolla brings 300 hp, a six-speed manual, and an all-wheel-drive system with variable torque splits. It has no rear seats and wears Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2 tires. Not since the AE86 GT-S has a Corolla threatened to embarrass sports cars.

Price
$51,420
Engine
1.6-liter turbocharged inline-3
Output
300 hp @ 6500 rpm
295 lb-ft @ 3250 rpm
Transmission
6-speed manual
Curb Weight
3186 lb



2023 PERFORMANCE CAR OF THE YEAR

DISCOVERING THE TRUTH AND FICTION OF OUR CONTENDERS AT THE LIMIT.

THE TRACK

THE ROAD

THE CHAMP

BY **TRAVIS OKULSKI**

PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM MEBANE

A. The hottest metal on the planet, gathered. If this doesn't make you giddy, you might check for a pulse.
B. We return to Monticello Motor Club, an idyllic track tucked into bucolic New York.
C. Hyundai's Elantra N, a serious contender for PCOTY honors, revels in track abuse.
D. The Subaru WRX felt outgunned here. We kneel and pray for an STI variant.

A **PERFORMANCE CAR** isn't a race car, but by definition it must perform. So what purpose does the track portion of the Performance Car of the Year competition serve?

Racetracks are, by far, the safest venue for exploiting today's absurdly powerful, ridiculously grippy performance cars. Track driving takes a thousand distractions and dangers out of the business of driving fast. It focuses the mind.

Racetracks aren't about ease of ingress and egress, the complexity of a car's user interface, or ride comfort. They are about speed. More important, they're about the ease with which a driver can harness that speed and the joy derived from the exercise.

A single driver runs three timed laps in each car, and we note the quickest one here. There is surely time to be shaved from each car's best lap; that's not the point. The point is to measure the

PHOTOGRAPHY: A, C, AND D: DW BURNETT; B: WILLIAM MEBANE

A

accessibility of each car's maximum performance.

The undulating 1.9-mile, nine-turn North Course at Monticello Motor Club in upstate New York is a perfect place to suss that out. The rest of the time during our two track days is at least partly for the staff's personal joy.

Here are the competitors, considered from slowest to fastest:

The Subaru WRX should compete directly with the GR Corolla and Elantra N; its name is synonymous with budget performance. But this new WRX may be too mature—good for commuting, less good for track days. The brakes were prone to fade, and there's an obvious focus on road comfort over high-velocity hilarity. The WRX was the slowest of this year's competitors at 1:34.8.

A tad quicker at 1:33.4 was the new Nissan Z. Sure, it has 400 hp, but it's also more eager to slide than the Subaru. That's great for smiles but bad for lap times. Alas, early in our testing, the Z's suspension suffered damage after hitting a curb on Monticello's tight switchback after the straight. Every other car hit that curb repeatedly for two full days without a problem, but it put the Z out of the competition almost before it started.

Next is Hyundai's Elantra N. The N-brand cars have repackaged humble parts into rambunctious driving devices built for character, not numbers. For just under $34,000, the Elantra N is the performance bargain of the moment. This compact sedan shouldn't be faster than a Z car, but it is.

On track, dive into the braking zone far later than should be comfortable, chuck it over a curb, and get back to power before the front wheels even land. Riotous. Complaints? The six-speed manual is unpleasantly notchy, the brakes can lack composure, and it's ugly. The Elantra N's 1:33.0 lap was still beyond respectable, though. "Just feels like a friend," says senior editor Chris Perkins, "a good friend."

Toyota's GR Corolla Morizo Edition is utterly track focused, and $50,995 is a lot of money for a Corolla. This one wears Pilot Sport Cup 2 tires on lightweight wheels. It has short gearing and no back seat. Plus, its turbocharged inline-three kicks out 300 hp and 295 lb-ft of torque. A riot at every turn of the wheel, the all-wheel-drive system helps it rotate midcorner and, depending on the selected torque split, can kick it into a drift. "It's a car that eggs you on," says staff writer Brian Silvestro. Toyota has built a modern race car posing as a sensible commuter. And it's fast, running an impressive 1:32.2.

Honda's newest Civic Type R takes a familiar formula—a revvy inline-four (now with 315 hp), front-wheel drive, and a slick six-speed manual—and basically perfects it. The last Type R loved to

B

C, D

be bounced off curbs and generally driven like you hated it, and the new car is similarly delightful.

This is one of the world's finest manual gearboxes. Shifts are positive, direct, and slick. The turbocharged engine pulls to 7000 rpm like an excited goldendoodle dragging you to a squirrel. Its willingness to rotate off-throttle and scamper out of a corner on power is a thing of beauty. Front-wheel-drive-hating digital director Aaron Brown even says, "This is the car that could convert me." Its lap, a 1:31.6 on optional Pilot Sport Cup 2 tires, is far slower than the Z06's, but it wasn't any less fun. This is front-drive royalty.

The Audi RS3 was the Monticello shocker. Small, hot Audis have often been fast but aloof with a tendency to bulldoze through corners. The new RS3 is, instead, a delight. It's a right-size Audi with a connected front end (thanks to the reverse tire stagger, 265s up front and 245s out back), strong-biting brakes, and that giddy 401-hp inline-five engine. Editor-at-large A.J. Baime sums it up: "Understated and pretty kick-ass." It posted a 1:28.9 lap, and it'll drift too.

BMW M4 CSL: No words, just letters and a number that mean so much in the 50th year of BMW M. The thing is, "CSL" is usually reserved for cars intended for the road first, track second. The Sport Cup 2 R tires here indicate otherwise. Driven after something exceptionally nimble such as the Cayman GT4 RS, the M4 initially feels boatlike. A thing you sit atop, not in. This 543-hp, lightweight, rear-drive M4 pulls like the gravity on Jupiter.

Lean into it with the traction control turned down, and the M4 CSL is a thrill. It has interstellar speed—the CSL, the Huracán Tecnica, and the Z06 were the only cars to exceed 140 mph—and it demands attention everywhere. You need to be active on the wheel, catching slides constantly on

A, B

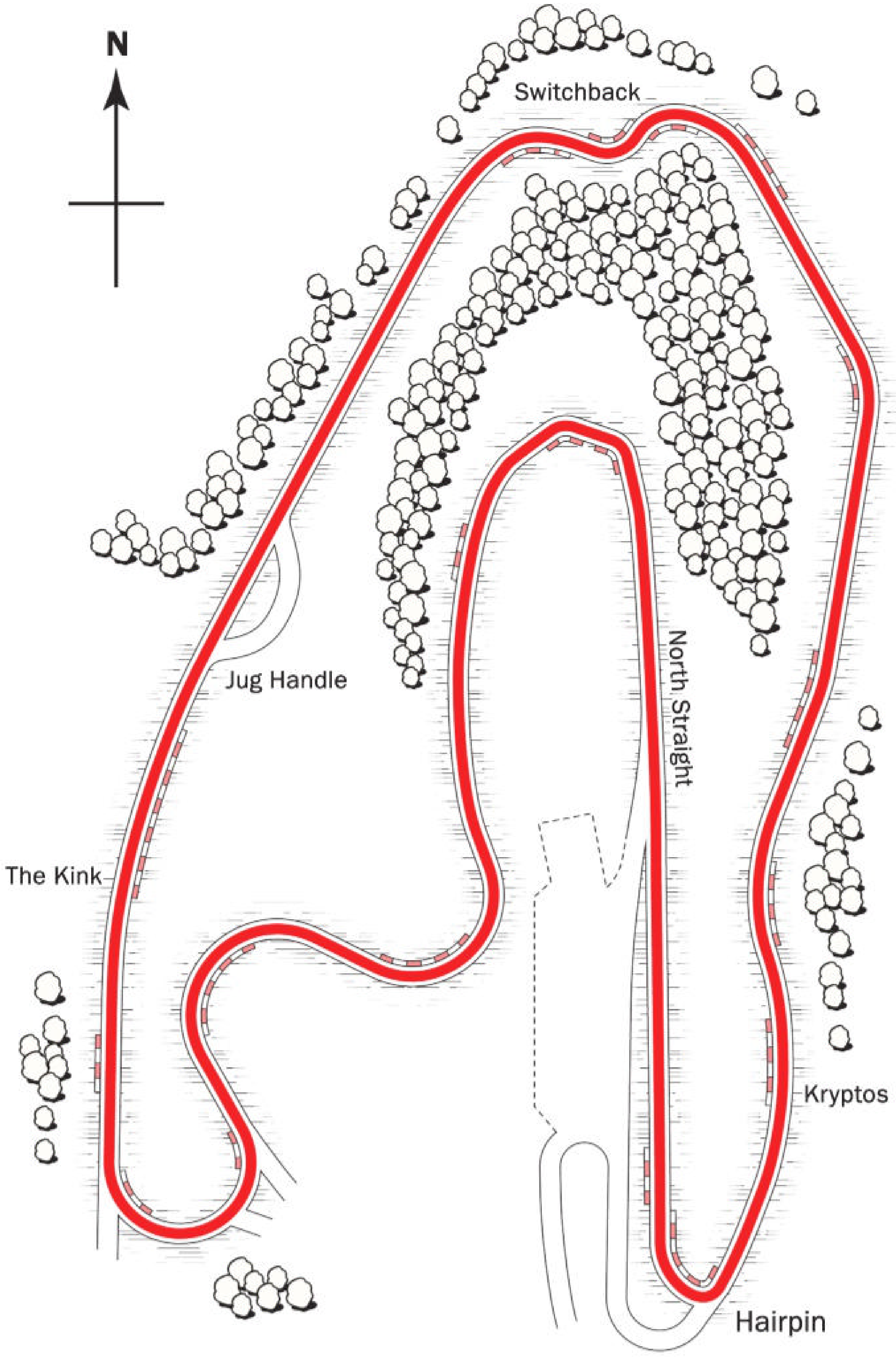
A. The test's best shifter and steering set the Civic Type R apart.
B. With enough throttle, you can oversteer the RS3. This drift is for you, Mr. Röhrl.
C. What you can see: a gorgeous Porsche. What you can't see: a wall of intake holler.

C

PHOTOGRAPHY: DW BURNETT

Monticello Motor Club

The North Course, 1.9 miles



corner exits. The steering is BMW's new normal: overboosted with little feel yet accurate. Trust it and it rewards. This was our fourth-quickest car, running a 1:24.2. But honestly, it's a bit boring to drive below its limits. At lower speeds, an all-wheel-drive M4 Competition is nearly as quick and much cheaper.

The Lamborghini Huracán Tecnica is to the Huracán STO as the Porsche GT3 Touring is to the regular GT3. Stripped of its most garish aero addenda, the 631-hp Tecnica keeps its rear-wheel drive, only now with a supposedly more road-tuned suspension. It's also slightly easier to see out of and a tad more comfortable.

Drive the two Huracáns back to back (yours and a friend's) and report if there's a difference. It is as hardcore, raucous, and thrilling as the big-winged STO. The Tecnica was third fastest in this year's test at 1:23.1 (1.2 seconds slower than the

A. Low-speed brain teasers and one high-speed ballbuster; they've got it all here.
B. You could hear this Lambo's V-10 scream from the other side of the racetrack. Amen.
C. Relentlessly fast on track, the M4 CSL punched well above its MSRP out here.

Times

Numbers don't rule our test, but they sure help settle sausage-measuring contests. Here are the winners and losers on a timed lap at Monticello.

2022 Subaru WRX	1:34.8
2023 Hyundai Elantra N	1:33.0
2023 Honda Civic Type R	1:31.6
2023 BMW M4 CSL	1:24.2
2023 Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 RS	1:22.7
2023 Nissan Z Performance	1:33.4
2023 Toyota GR Corolla ME	1:32.2
2023 Audi RS3	1:28.9
2023 Lamborghini Huracán Tecnica	1:23.1
2023 Chevrolet Corvette Z06	1:20.6

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY **MIKE HALL**

PHOTOGRAPHY: A: WILLIAM MEBANE, B AND C: DW BURNETT

STO last year). Monticello has minor bumps in its heaviest braking zones, and the Huracán moves around quite a bit. It demands a lot of the driver. It might have lost its dorsal fin, but this Lambo is still wild and powerful.

Sounding like a liter superbike, Porsche's Cayman GT4 RS has the shortest gearing Porsche has ever stuffed into a dual-clutch PDK box. So the 493-hp 4.0-liter flat-six from the 911 GT3 often hits its 9000-rpm redline even on a tight circuit like the North Course. And because Porsche replaced the rear quarter-windows with intakes that feed an airbox just behind your head, the engine is practically inside your brain.

Porsche has always been reluctant to make the Cayman too fast; protesters would storm Stuttgart if the Cayman were swifter than a 911. But with the next-generation Cayman likely electric, to hell with that. Welcome the riot.

Beyond sound and manic acceleration, the Cayman GT4 RS is balanced with a hyperconnected front end that won't wash wide on power down. "Like a wedge of billet titanium," senior editor Kyle Kinard says. "It feels as light as it does invincible." It was the fourth most powerful in our test but ran a 1:22.7, the second-quickest time. However, nearly $200,000 (as tested) is an astronomical price for a Cayman.

There was never any doubt about which car would be the fastest this year. Chevy's latest Corvette Z06, packing a new 670-hp 5.5-liter flat-plane-crank V-8, was the most powerful car in our test. It had nearly slick Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2 R tires and the ultra-aggressive Z07 track pack.

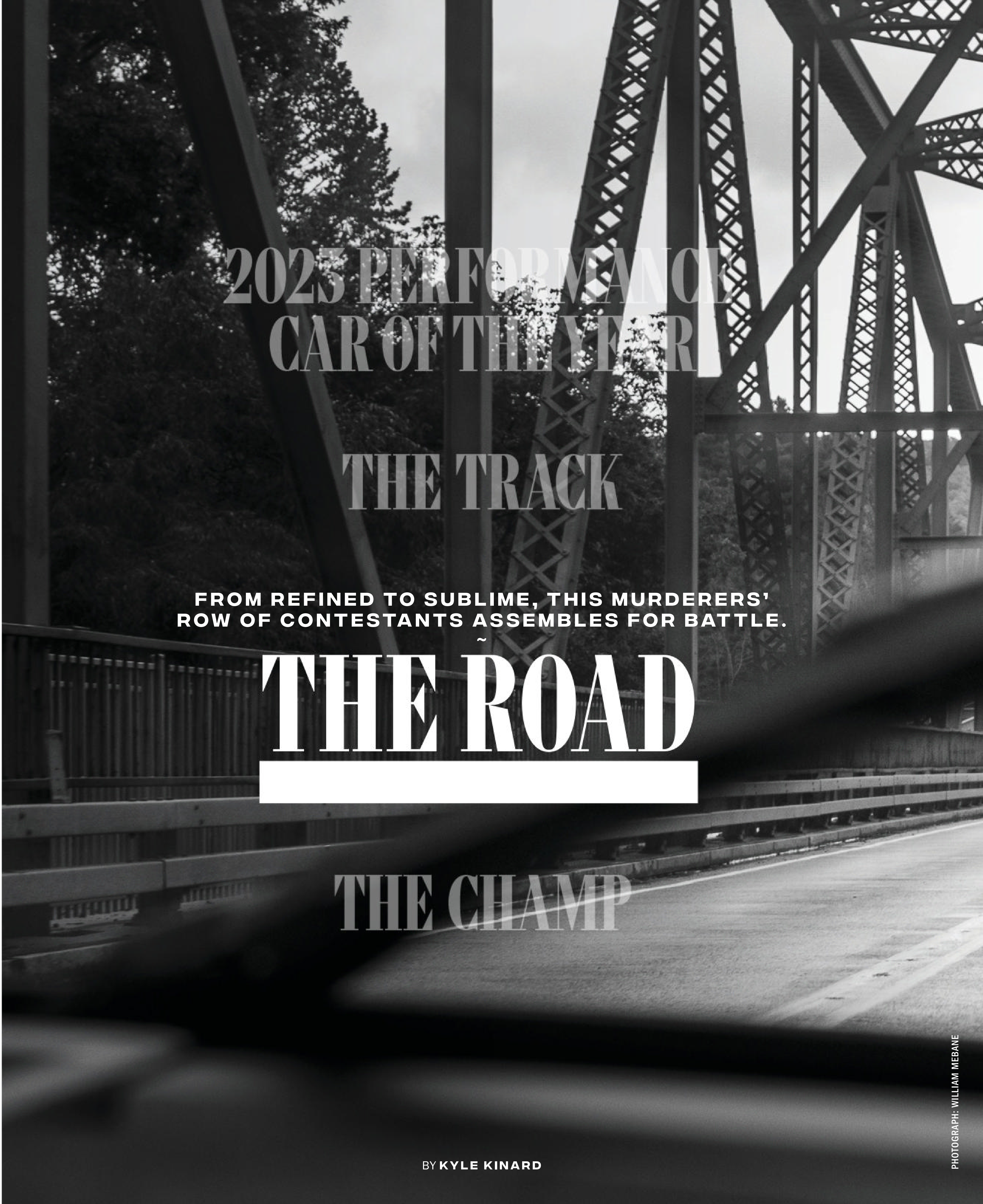
The Z06 ran a 1:20.6, easily besting the GT4 RS by two seconds. It's wide and low, with big aero and fat tires (275/30-R20s up front, 345/25-R21s out back), and it boasts one of the world's most aggressive engine barks. It should be scary and intimidating. Instead, it's a trusty partner in speed. Its chassis tuning, extreme braking performance, and behavior on power-down fully exploit the mid-engine platform.

"The Z06 is so awe-inspiring and engrossing that when I got out, I wanted to lie down," says reviews editor Mack Hogan. The Z06 proved interesting and fun, no matter the pace or driver's experience. And it wasn't the only car that came in with near-unanimous praise.

Yes, the track is but one piece of the PCOTY puzzle. The roads through the Catskills could tell a very different story about these cars. Could the aggressive Z07 package that made the Z06 such a track monster ruin it on the road? Would the WRX shine in the real world? And could the Civic Type R, the GR Corolla, and the Cayman GT4 RS follow up impressive lap times with street delight?

A

B, C



2023 PERFORMANCE CAR OF THE YEAR

THE TRACK

FROM REFINED TO SUBLIME, THIS MURDERERS' ROW OF CONTESTANTS ASSEMBLES FOR BATTLE.

THE ROAD

THE CHAMP

BY **KYLE KINARD**

PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM MEBANE

THE RAIN IS FALLING HARD. Juicy, wobbly droplets crack like rifle shots against the windshield. It's just past noon on the side of some no-name upstate New York highway, nothing but clear back roads ahead. A crackle issues from the radio.

"You ready to roll?"

We've been waiting all year for the chance to turn New York's autumn splendor into a blur. We've gathered the best cars that debuted in 2022, from rorty hatchbacks to bladelike exotics. We dropped them all into a sawdust death pit, then sat back to watch the brawl set off. Engines bark to life, and we kick up our heels for the best-damned test on earth.

There is a line of rare metal trailing behind me, low-slung six-digit wedges with their shouty looks, but for running all out on slick asphalt, there's no better seat in the house than the Toyota

A

PHOTOGRAPHY: DW BURNETT

A. The year's big question: Could anything top the 670-hp Corvette Z06?
B. You ever just roll down the windows to yell at a pasture of cows? No? Us either.
C. We don't make the rules, we only follow. When driving a rally car, you must jump.
D. Soggy roads revealed the fair-weather contenders and the all-season champs.

GR Corolla. Perhaps no car stoked more anticipation than this gawky flat-black jukebox, and none are flattered more by a low-grip back road.

"Truly wonderful," editor-at-large Travis Okulski gushes. "A company that builds some exceptionally boring appliances built a hot hatch with a soul."

That turbocharged three, connected to trick differentials and all-wheel drive, felt deeply special on track, but the package feels doubly fizzy on these roads where wet leaves and standing water abound.

The Audi RS3 performs the same trick, reeling in cars with twice its $67,690 tested price. This relentless ball of muscle and five-cylinder snarl makes the whole effort of driving fast feel effortless. *Road & Track*'s staff agrees: The RS3 would make for the best daily driver in the group. Its slick interior feels more elegant than the rest, with the finest infotainment interface on offer. The RS3's suspension best suits long hauls; its cabin was a favorite for the leggy trips to dinner at the end of each day.

But is it gnarly enough?

Victory at PCOTY requires more than ticking boxes, and to its credit, this sedan ticks many. The RS3 may be Audi's most hard-nosed compact sedan, but it needs to let more hair down to steal attention among this group.

It's the same with our bright-red WRX, a competent daily driver with excellent road manners, motivated by the smoothest boxer-four in the business. But for all its competence, the WRX lacks sharpness. We're not sure whether an STI version will ever return, but boy, do we miss that pink badge more than ever.

The Elantra N gets far closer to the mark, sharper and quicker than the WRX, with a grumpy exhaust note to boot. It handles like a stretched version of our 2020 PCOTY-winning Veloster N, offering the same pep from its 276-hp turbocharged inline-four. Some staff even preferred the Elantra N to the Veloster.

"Value-wise, this blows everything out of the water," staff writer Brian Silvestro says. "Makes everything else in the test seem like it's taking itself too seriously."

But in search of performance, this sport compact left some civility on the table. Executive editor Daniel Pund notes the ride is flintier on the road than you'd like, with a drab interior reminding you how Hyundai shaves the Elantra N's MSRP down to $33,745. From nearly every angle, it's another incredible effort from Hyundai. Well, so long as you're not looking directly at it.

"Shame about the looks," Pund laments, pointing to the Elantra's techno–Cheshire Cat mug.

B

C, D

We still haven't wrapped our brains around the M4's nose job, either. That flared pig's snout that overtook the 4-series is spreading throughout BMW's lineup. Yet the real curiosity is the badge affixed to this M4's trunk. The letters "CSL" have graced only the lightest, most focused versions of the best compact BMWs ever built, legends like the E46 M3 CSL and E9 3.0 CSL "Batmobile."

Like other M4s, the CSL plays drift missile in every corner, with accurate steering and a firm, unflappable chassis. When the road is dry and the tires warm, no supercar will shake the CSL from its mirrors. But despite a bump in power, a bit of weight shaved off, and some visual faff, the M4 CSL doesn't do enough to separate itself from the standard M4.

We want the old E46 CSL tricks applied to the new M4: even less sound deadening, an idiosyncratic intake note, zero embellishments, and no A/C or radio or lighted CSL badges in the headrests. Every component of a CSL should make sense when viewed through the uncompromising lens of the phrase "The Ultimate Driving Machine." This CSL couldn't clear that hallowed bar.

Finding that Goldilocks mix proves elusive. On paper, the Lamborghini Huracán Tecnica got everything right. Last year we commended the Huracán STO's frankly batshit commitment to theater, equipped as it was with perhaps the loudest exhaust note we've ever heard on a road car, plus fixed-back carbon buckets and a buzzing character best downed in a shot glass.

Lamborghini kept the good bits of the STO but rounded off some of its sharpest edges to create the Huracán Tecnica. The Tecnica preserves the STO's fantastic steering feel, a pointy, get-there-now system that fires the car at every apex with mere twitches of the steering wheel. Plus, the V-10 engine's shriek still hits harder than a bucketful of knuckles.

But the STO's brutal suspension tuning isn't eased nearly enough. A long day at the wheel of the Tecnica takes more out of you than a week on the road in a regular car. It's thrilling on a racetrack but draining on a back road.

Somehow the most hard-core Cayman ever built, the GT4 RS, nosed just far enough toward sanity to avoid the Tecnica's fate, with seats and suspension comfortable enough to keep us from reaching for the 'roid cream. Barely.

The GT4's captivating engine may have allowed us to take more punishment than we'd normally tolerate. That shrieking 4.0-liter 9000-rpm flat-six borrowed from the GT3 is a zenith, peerless in its charisma at redline. We're intoxicated by the engine's full soundtrack, including the ripping rush of air just over your shoulder,

PHOTOGRAPHY: A, C, AND D: DW BURNETT, B: WILLIAM MEBANE

A **B**

as the engine pulls in the atmosphere through inlets in the quarter-windows.

Sound isn't the Civic Type R's strong suit, but on these tight country roads where uncertainty lurks, you can't stretch any car's legs enough to gap the Honda. Plus, it does everything else so well. Its interior is a master class in simple design, with the best seats, the best gearbox, (arguably) the best steering feel, and the best shift action of any car in the test. And it has three pedals to work.

Whether hot or cold, wet or dry, the new Type R brings joy in every two-lane corner and down any winding back road. Its firebomb engine and firm yet comfy chassis tuning contribute to a car with peerless versatility that sacrifices nothing on the altar of practicality. Both track rats and soccer dads could drive away from this test in the new Civic Type R and never look back in jealousy. It's that good.

A. GT4 RS intake noise versus Lambo's shouty exhaust; we can't pick a winner.
B. Sometimes it's best to stop and gawk at nature. Mostly it's best to drive real fast.
C. Our editors fell for the GR Corolla's funky rally charm. On the road, it's perfect.
D. Pendleton wool and an all-wheel-drive Audi, perfect bedfellows for cool fall air.

C, D

Our final contestant is the one you've probably been dying to read about. An engineer told me the Corvette Z06 could stick wide-open through the Nürburgring's infamous Fuchsröhre corner, generating two lateral g's of grip while simultaneously suffering two vertical g's of compression.

But on these roads, there's not a foxhole corner in sight. Could something this balls-out engage us on a back road where there are no stopwatches? The answer shouts back from the Z06's raspy exhaust: "Duh, idiot. I'm still a Corvette."

More than one editor called the Z06 a down-home Ferrari, its flat-plane V-8 scream reminiscent of the 458 Italia. We never ran out of excuses to ring that engine out to redline, our mouths spread into wide, stupid grins at the audacity of the thing, the sheer American-ness of it all.

Its dual-clutch automatic couldn't shift quite as quickly as Porsche's PDK, but it did click through gears smoothly and predictably. The Z07 package brought more spring to the party, but the Vette's magnetic dampers are calibrated so superbly that you could easily live with the Z06 as a daily.

As the decision point crept closer, our test winding to an end, the editors circled back to linger by one of the top three contenders, draping their elbows over the GT4 RS's ironing-board wing, lounging in the Civic's perfect seats, taking the Z06 on one last rip down the road—anything to vanquish indecision.

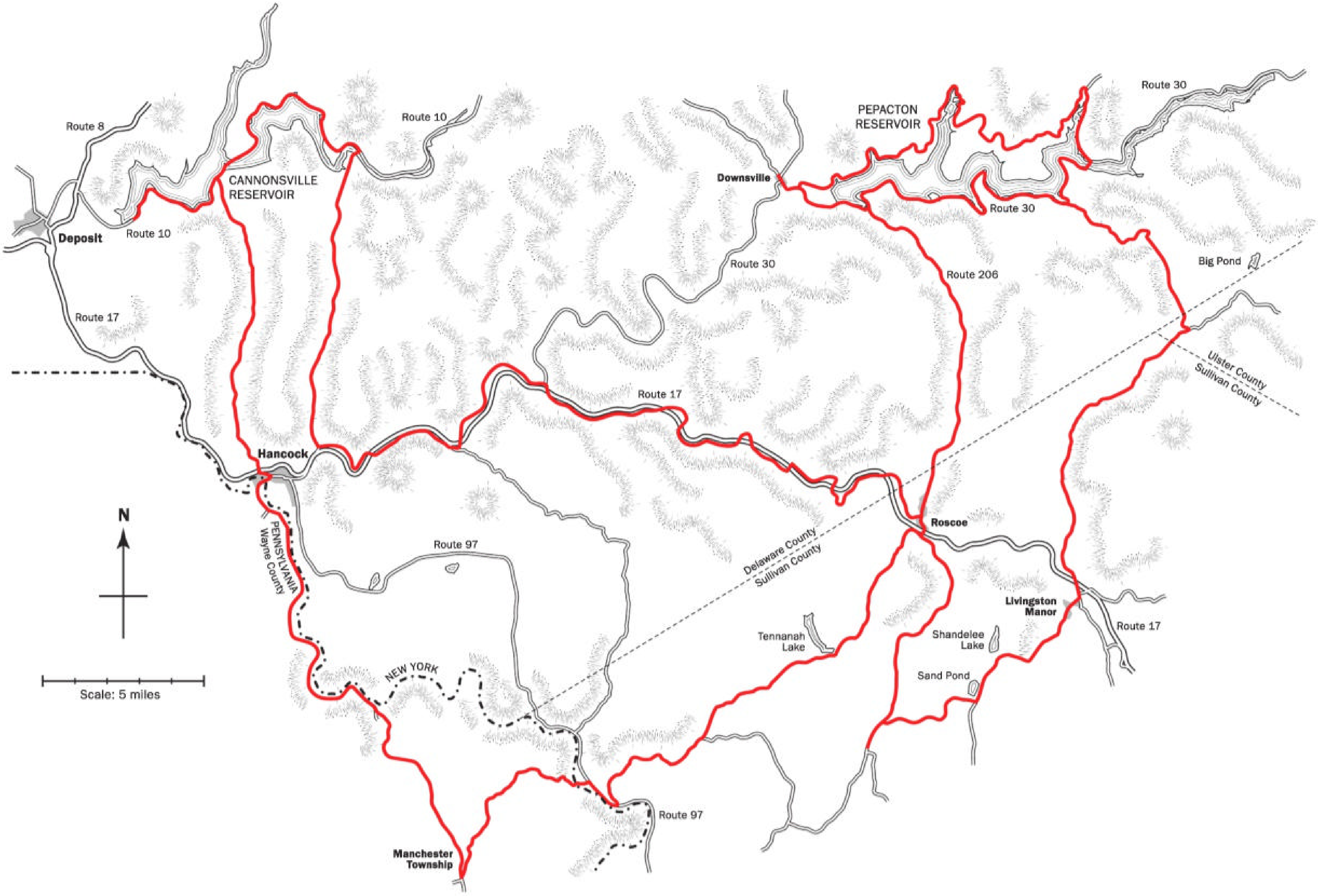
But ultimately, only thimblefuls of dissent poured into the discussion. A nearly unanimous champion emerged. Maybe it was an obvious choice; one car felt destined for the crown. Its performance served as a rolling affirmation of that destiny. Our ultimate champion on the track proved just as exciting on the road.

As difficult choices go, this was an easy one.

The Catskills Loop

Upstate New York, 192 miles

Our test loop pairs plenty of glassy high-speed sweepers with gnarled greasy asphalt bends. Here you'll encounter enough pavement to suss out any sports car. The breathtaking river views are just a bonus.


Route 8
Route 10
CANNONSVILLE RESERVOIR
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Route 10
Route 17
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PENNSYLVANIA
Wayne County
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Route 97
NEW YORK
Manchester Township
Route 97
Downsville
Route 30
PEPACTON RESERVOIR
Route 30
Route 30
Route 206
Big Pond
Ulster County
Sullivan County
Route 17
Delaware County
Sullivan County
Roscoe
Livingston Manor
Route 17
Tennanah Lake
Shandelee Lake
Sand Pond

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY **MIKE HALL**

PHOTOGRAPH: DW BURNETT

2023 PERFORMANCE CAR OF THE YEAR

THE TRACK

THE ROAD

THE 2023 CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06 IS THE LAST AMERICAN HERO.

THE CHAMP

BY **JOHN PEARLEY HUFFMAN**

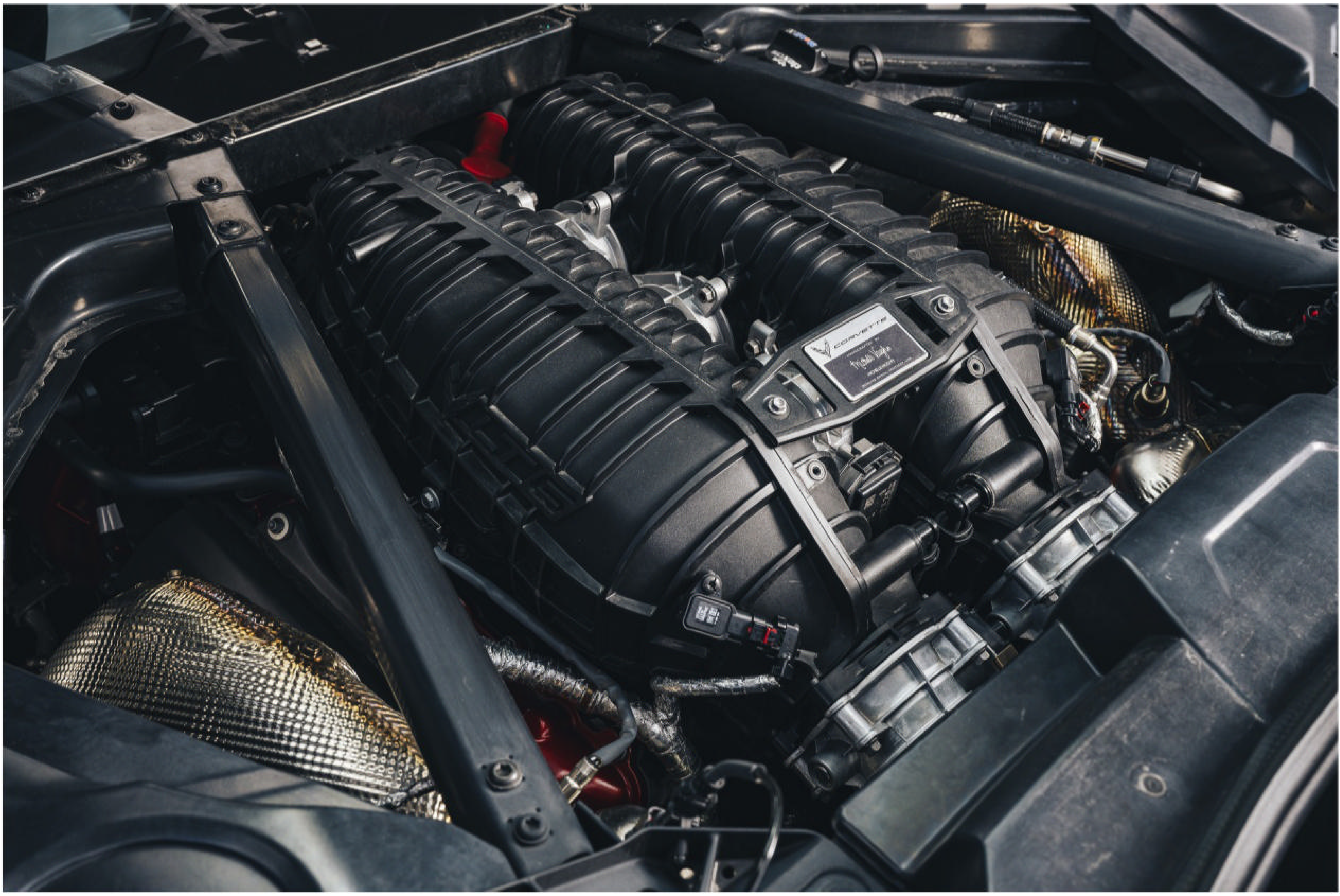
PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM MEBANE

THE NEW 2023 Z06 is the Corvette unshackled. It's beholden to neither heritage nor history nor Chevrolet itself. If it shares any part with other GM products, it's something incidental, like a windshield-wiper motor or a door latch. The engine is positioned where the engineers have long wanted it, and that engine is one of which they've long dreamed. It proved itself on track before it made it to the road. After 70 years, this thing has all the right stuff. It is the Corvette in full.

"I hate to use the term 'compromise,'" says Tadge Juechter, executive chief engineer for the Corvette, "because every car is a balance. If you look at the history of the Z06 in the modern era, it has walked more extreme with each generation. We've taken the formula and made it more vibrant, more powerful, more focused."

Like the C6 and C7 Z06 models, this C8 version was planned alongside the standard Stingray

A. GM's 5.5-liter masterpiece, sonorous as a symphony, powerful as a towering wave.
B. The greatest Corvette ever built? It's hard to trump the Z06's bottomless charisma.


PHOTOGRAPHY: DW BURNETT

A

model. The C6 and C7, however, were evolutionary designs that refined the C5 paradigm—engine in front, transmission in back. The C8's mid-engine packaging enables it to accommodate a wide, double-overhead-cam 32-valve V-8 that would otherwise have to snake up through a front-engine car's frame rails and bodywork at the plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

"One reason why we had such free rein on the LT6 with the double-overhead cams and the big intake manifold is that we didn't have to worry about someone having to look over the hood," says GM's global small-block chief engineer, Jordan Lee. "This engine in a front-engine car? You'd barely be able to see through the windshield."

Lee contends this is a small-block V-8 because "a small-block is an engine designed and developed by the small-block team." And it does share the 4.4-inch bore spacing every Chevrolet small-block V-8 has had since 1955. But no. It's not a small-block. The LT6 is really a hand-built 670-hp 5.5-liter race engine.

It's the first GM engine developed solely with a dry-sump oiling system. The rev-friendly oversquare dimensions—big 4.10-inch cylinder bores and short 3.15-inch crank strokes—stand in contrast to the long levers needed for torquey truck V-8s. And then there's the awesome respiration of a flat-plane crankshaft. "We often refer to it as two four-cylinder engines in a fistfight," says Lee.

There may or may not be a flat-plane crank V-8 in GM's prehistoric past. No one seems sure.

And 5.5 liters is huge displacement for a flat-plane V-8. Maybe the largest ever. "Most flat-planes are pretty small displacement," Lee adds. "We did not want to give up displacement because we still wanted to have some respectable low-speed torque." Also, 5.5 liters is, not coincidentally, the maximum displacement allowed for the FIA's World Endurance Championship LMGTE class. The LT6.R, the LT6's race brother, has been in the C8.R race car since the 2020 season. "We engineered the two engines as a team," says Lee. The team tore down the LT6.Rs after races, and that experience went into the LT6. "The racing helped a ton," concludes Lee.

There are no demon tweaks in the LT6 that tame the paint-shaker vibrations of the flat-plane layout. Instead, the short stroke and lightweight rotating mass keep the vibrations within parameters set using the Ferrari 458 as a benchmark. That's one hell of a bench.

Start the cold Z06, and it inhales a massive glob of air, whirs a moment, then bursts to high idle with a sound that's half Pro Stock, half Indy car, and half North American mountain lion. With volumetric efficiencies exceeding 100 percent, this

PHOTOGRAPH: DW BURNETT

engine deserves three halves. The rest of the C8 is wonderful, but the LT6 elevates it to glorious.

When the Tremec eight-speed dual-clutch transmission engages a gear, the LT6 growls in anticipation, then rips up toward its 8600-rpm redline at the touch of the throttle. No engine in the history of General Motors or Planet Earth has combined a large-displacement American snarl with rev-happy Italianate giddiness like this one. Like a morphine and Tetris cocktail, it's addictive.

The Z06 is rear-drive, but its 345-millimeter back Michelin tires bite into tarmac with viral appetite. With the Z07 package, those Michelins are of the extra-hungry Pilot Sport Cup 2 R variety. The car reaches 60 mph in 2.6 seconds and runs the quarter-mile deep into the 10s, and the steering turns in like Patton pivoting to chase the Germans out of the Ardennes Forest. The body is 3.6 inches wider than a standard Stingray to cover that big rubber, but so aerodynamically optimized that you can feel the Z06 planting itself on track as speed grows. Apart from the doors, each body panel at and below the beltline is unique to the Z06, but the structure underneath is the same as the Stingray's.

With that in mind, this isn't a car that delivers a velveteen ride. And the cockpit privacy divider separating the driver and passenger is still there.

Mechanically, there's never been less Chevrolet in a Corvette. But spiritually? The Z06 development process recalls the "Mystery Motor" 427-cid V-8 Chevrolet campaigned (with Smokey Yunick, among others) in NASCAR during 1963. That engine evolved into the 1965 Corvette L78 425-hp 396-cid "big-block" and all the other big-block V-8s. And the LT6's bore-to-stroke ratio parallels that of the short-stroke DZ302 small-block in the 1967–69 Camaro Z/28 for the SCCA Trans-Am competition. The new Z06 isn't beholden to past Chevys, but its existence honors history.

Finally, the new Z06 is a Chevy in several ways that matter. First, as Aaron Link, lead development engineer for the Z06, notes, "If you need help with your Corvette, there are 3000 dealers in this country to help you." Second, coupe or convertible, the Z06 can be optioned with restraint or indulgence like any Corvette. Most important, prices for the Z06 coupe start at $109,295, a raging bargain for something that feels so exotic.

That mix of home-team decency and breakneck speed stole our hearts. The engine's redline rush delivered on decades of anticipation. For its staggering track performance and engagement on the road, we anoint the 2023 Chevrolet Corvette Z06 our champion.

C

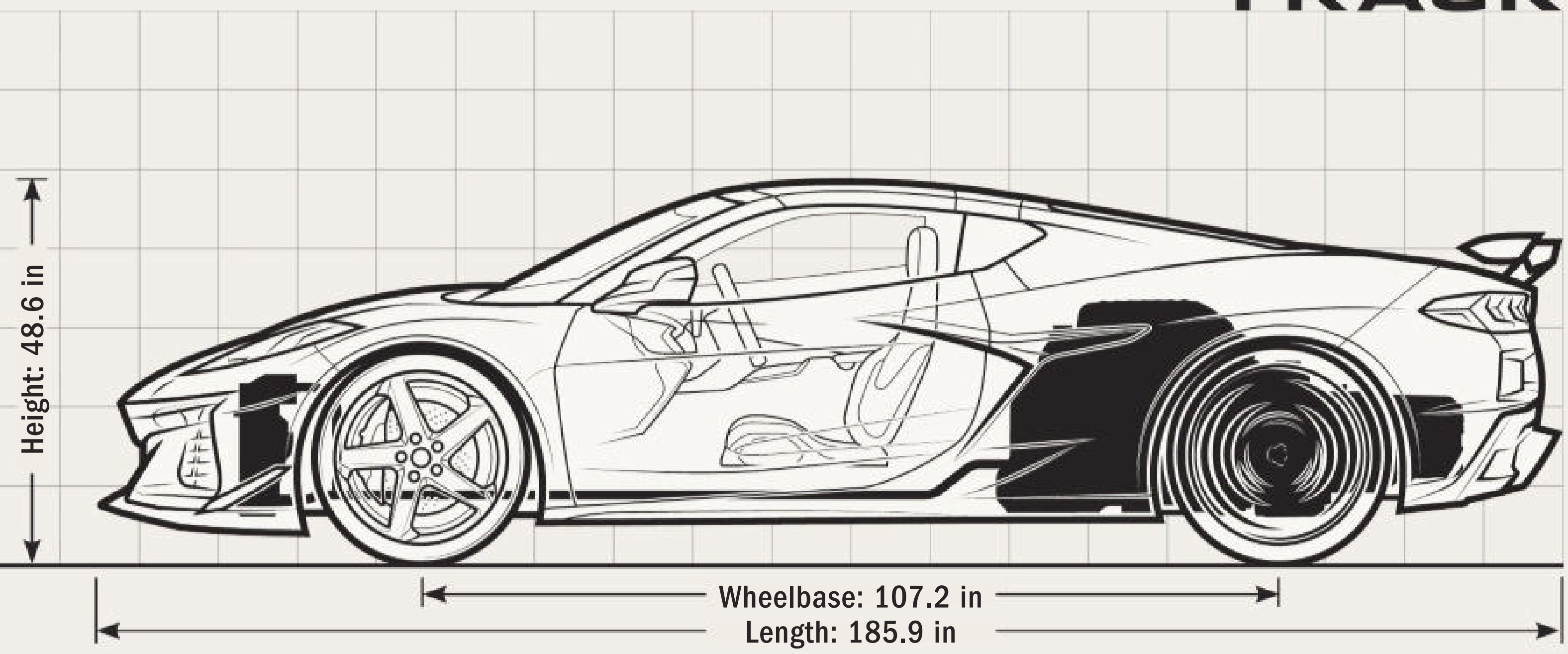
A, B

A. Please stop with the squircle steering wheel, Chevrolet.
B. The drooping center section of the Z06's rear wing preserves some of the rearward visibility. Practical!
C. Even at $166,205, the Z06 is a performance bargain.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DW BURNETT

2023 Chevrolet Corvette Z06 with Z07

Curb Weight
3666 lb
F: 39.7% R: 60.3%



Front Track: 66.3 in

Width: 79.7 in

Rear Track: 66.1 in

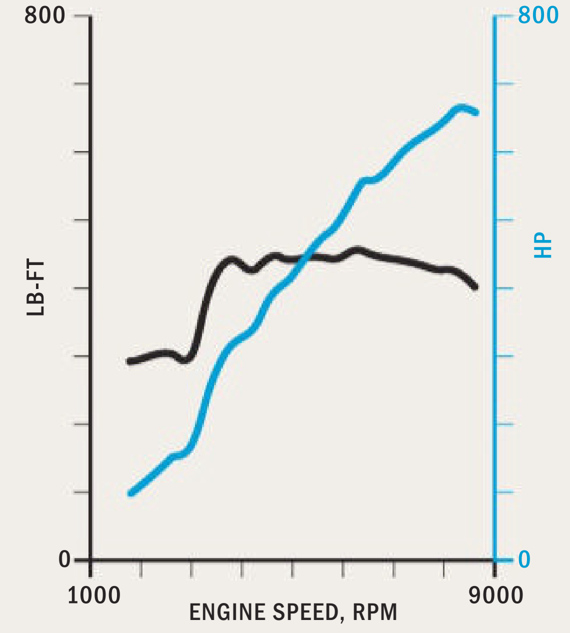
Price

Base $109,295
As Tested $166,205

Engine

Layout .... mid-engine, longitudinal
Configuration V-8
Induction .... naturally aspirated
Material ...... aluminum block and heads, iron cylinder liners
Valvetrain .... DOHC, 32 valves
Displacement .... 5463 cc
Bore x Stroke .... 4.104 x 3.150 in
Compression Ratio 12.5:1

Engine Output



Torque
460 lb-ft @ 6300 rpm

Horsepower
670 hp @ 8400 rpm

Redline .... 8600 rpm
Fuel Delivery .... direct injection

Transmission

Driven Wheels .... rear
Type ... eight-speed dual-clutch automatic
Rear Differential .... limited-slip
Final-Drive Ratio 5.56:1

Gear	Ratio	Top Speed
1	2.905	42 mph @ 8600
2	1.759	70 mph @ 8600
3	1.220	102 mph @ 8600
4	0.878	141 mph @ 8600
5	0.653	189 mph @ 8600*
6	0.508	189 mph*
7	0.397	189 mph*
8	0.329	189 mph*

*aero limited

Steering

Assist .... electric
Turns Lock-to-Lock 2.5
Turning Circle .... 36.4 ft

Suspension

Front/Rear .... double wishbone

Brakes and Tires

Front: 15.7 x 1.5-in vented, cross-drilled carbon-ceramic disc; 6-piston caliper
Rear: 15.4 x 1.3-in vented, cross-drilled carbon-ceramic disc; 4-piston caliper
Stability Control: fully defeatable, competition mode, traction off, launch control
Tires: Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2 R ZP
Front: 275/30ZR-20 (97Y) TPC Spec 3124 Extra Load
Rear: 345/25ZR-21 (104Y) TPC Spec 3125 Extra Load

Body and Chassis

Construction .... unit construction
Materials: extruded and cast aluminum, carbon-fiber-reinforced composite
Doors/Seats 2/2
Cargo Capacity .... 12.6 ft³

Weight

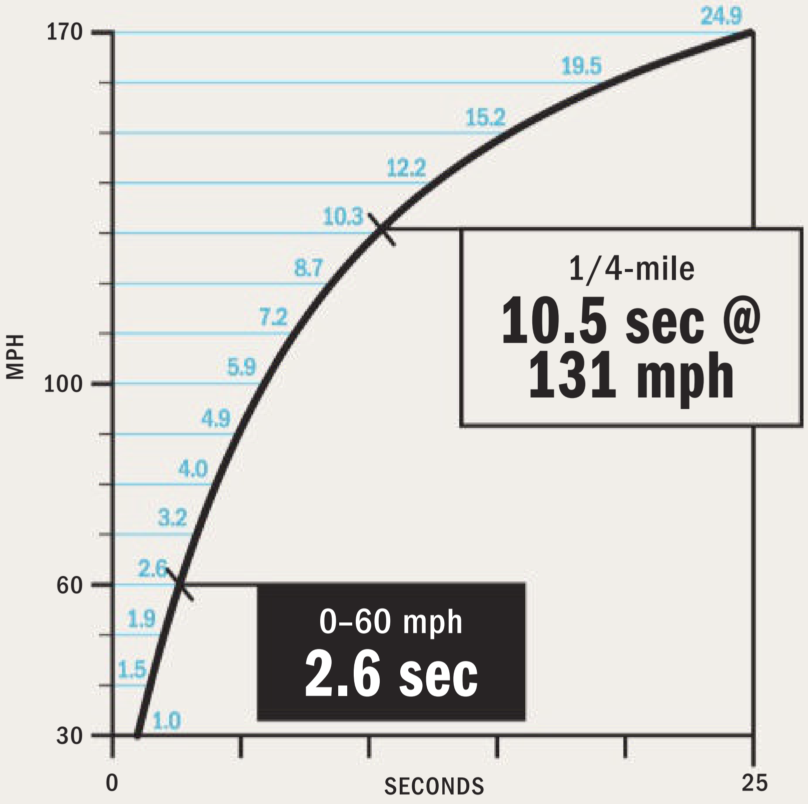
Curb Weight .... 3666 lb
Weight-to-Power .... 5.5 lb/hp

Fuel

EPA City/Hwy .... 12/19 mpg
Capacity .... 18.5 gal
Range .... 351 miles
Fuel Grade .... premium

Test Results

Acceleration



1/4-mile
10.5 sec @ 131 mph

0–60 mph
2.6 sec

Results in graph omit 1-ft rollout of 0.2 sec.

Top Speed
189 mph

Roadholding, 300-ft Skidpad
1.16 g

Braking

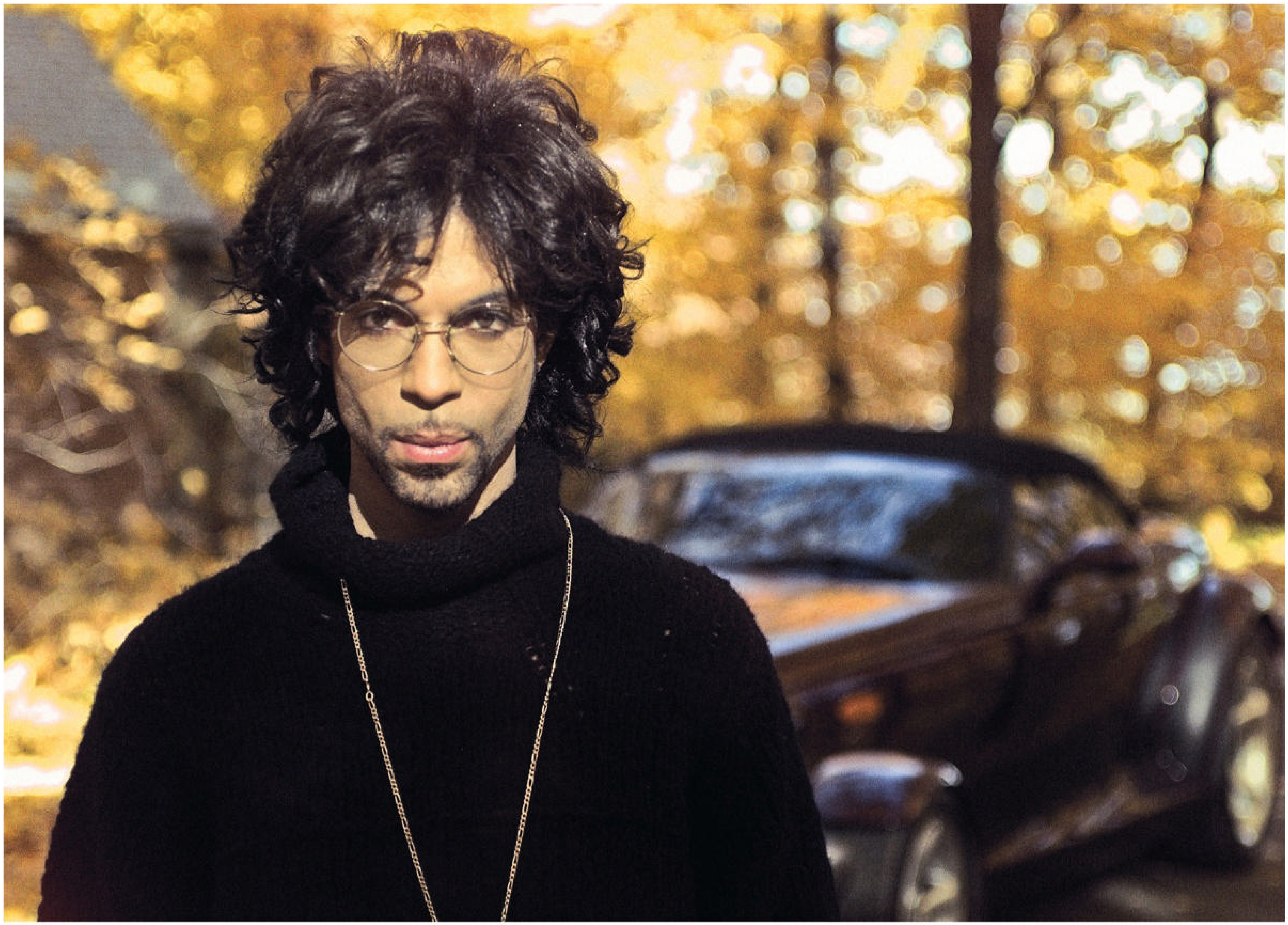
70–0 mph
139 ft

100–0 mph
274 ft

Handling

Balance .... moderate understeer

ILLUSTRATION BY **CLINT FORD**



PRINCE OF LEAVES

Prince was an enigma. A sex symbol who stood five feet two (not that short guys can't be sexy), he was a master of soul, rock, funk, jazz, hip-hop, new wave, R&B—you name it. Yet he lived in a quiet suburb of Minneapolis. Reportedly a devout Jehovah's Witness, he produced around 50 albums and days upon days' worth of unreleased material, then died of a fentanyl overdose at age 57. He could play any instrument, but a blazing guitar was his forte—witnessed by all upon George Harrison's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, when he wiped the stage with the Eric Clapton solo in "While My Guitar Gently Weeps."

Most perplexingly, Prince was also an apparent leaf peeper. In this rare photograph, we see some of the most beguiling elements of cars and music mashed into one shot, with a healthy portion of seasonal tourism. Never much of a car enthusiast (more of a Hondamatic guy, actually), the Purple One, adorned in a gold chain and a cowl-neck sweater, drove a very well-sorted Plymouth Prowler (if such a thing existed) somewhere into a deciduous forest at the height of autumn and posed for a quick snap.

—MIKE GUY

PHOTOGRAPH BY **STEVE PARKE**

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